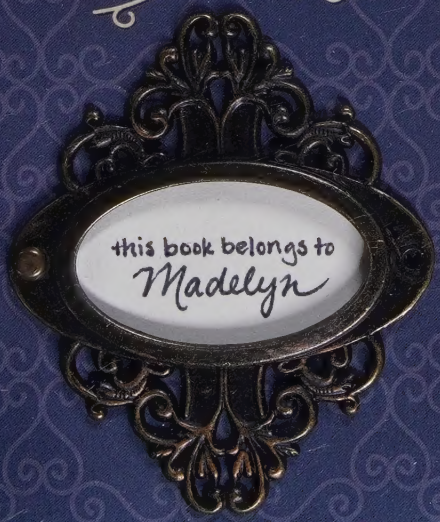
THE Fairytale's Daughter



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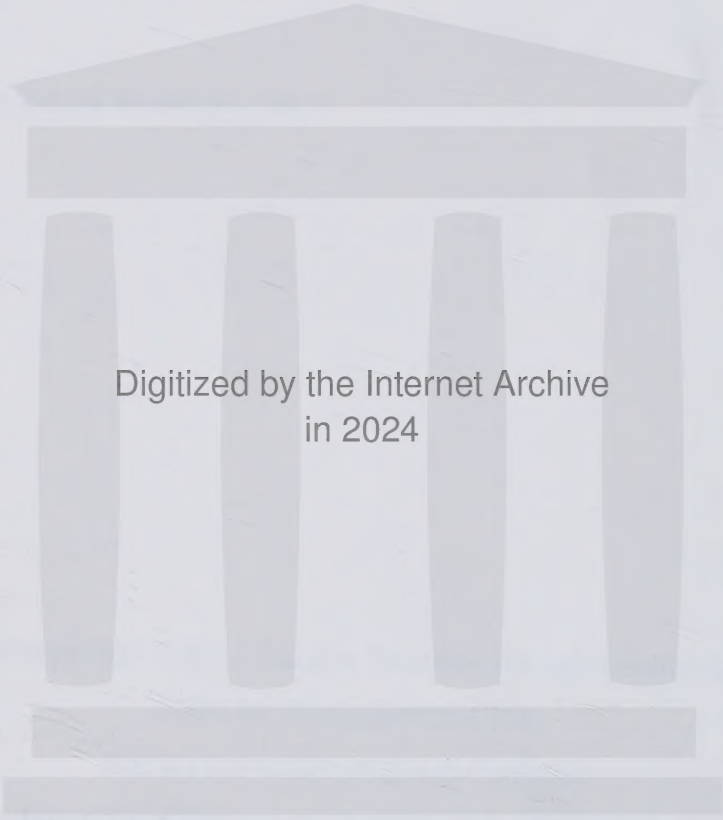
— for Carl, who lets me be a princess



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Chapter One

Every morning of Aylan Charming's life began with magic, and it never got any less annoying. Without fail, the sun would rise, and then "*click-click-click-click*" — the sound of hundreds of tiny feet would fill her room and invade her consciousness and any further sleep would become impossible. "Annoying" was really the only word for it.

On that particular morning, Aylan rolled onto her belly and tossed a pillow at the source of the clicking, but it was no use; the dollhouse in the corner of her room had come alive like it always did, and none of the tiny figures inside cared one bit that they were bothering her.

"Silence!" she commanded in her most regal voice, but the clicking continued. She glared at the miniature servants who were going about their business, all studiously ignoring her. "I like the real-life versions of you guys so much better," she grumbled. She'd asked repeatedly if the model castle could be moved to another room in the actual castle, but her governess, Henriette, had been quite firm: "That dollhouse was a gift from your godmother, specifically to be kept in your room, and you should never, *ever* question gifts from your godmother." That left Aylan stuck with the most irritating alarm clock of all time.

"Speaking of Henriette," she murmured, scanning the halls for the elegant figure of her governess, and hoping to find her occupied. "Ugh." Henriette was nearly at the top of the stairs that lead to Aylan's room in the castle's sea-facing upper tower. It looked as though both her sleep and her spying were being cut short this morning.

Knowing a lost cause when she saw one, Aylan climbed out of bed. If she couldn't sleep and she couldn't surveil, she could at least get up and go eat. She wandered around to the far side of the model castle to peek into the atrium and see what was being served for breakfast, and unexpectedly stepped on something sharp.

"Ow!" she cried, kicking at the offending object. The figure of her brother Liam skittered across the floor and bounced off the wall. Aylan rolled her eyes and watched as it got back up and began walking toward the castle's back entrance near the kitchens. "He must have been down at the beach. I wonder where he's stashed his latest project." She laughed as he entered the castle, and the thimble-sized heads of the kitchen maids turned appreciatively to watch him cross the room. He was becoming a rather handsome man, though she'd never puff his ego by telling him so.

Aylan lifted the domed glass hatch of the atrium's roof and peered inside. As expected, the figures of her parents were already seated in front of plates piled high with pancakes, but it was obvious that something was wrong. Her father's pea-sized fist pounded the table, rattling the cutlery, while her mother waved a spoon in his face, dripping tiny specks of cream.

"Are they fighting?"

"Perhaps if you stop spying on your parents and go talk to them, you could find out. That really is rather rude, after all."

Aylan jumped. "You know, I don't remember hearing you knock, Henry, so you have no grounds to talk about rudeness. And if you don't want me spying, maybe we should move this monstrosity out of my room."

"You didn't hear me knock because I didn't knock," answered Henriette. "If I stood outside waiting for an invitation, you'd probably stay in bed all day."

Aylan grinned. "Probably."

"And we are not moving that dollhouse. I've told you over and over again…"

"I know," said Aylan rolling her eyes. "It's a gift from my godmother and blah blah blah. So do you know what this fight is about?"

"I do."

"Are you going to tell me?"

"I'm not."

"I bet it's about Liam. Did he try to steal a cannon from the armory again or something?"

Henriette laughed. "It's not always about Liam. Your parents discuss you too, you know."

"Me? But what have I done?"

"Aside from shamelessly invading everyone's privacy? Nothing. This isn't about anything you've done… it's about something you're going to do. If you decide to. And that's all I'm going to tell you. Now let's hurry and get you dressed, before your breakfast gets cold."

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Fifteen minutes later Aylan appeared in the downstairs hall, Henriette's intriguing hint still playing in her mind. She crept silently toward the wide double doors that lead to the atrium, straining to catch the conversation happening inside. She pressed an ear against the heavy wooden door, and held her breath.

"All I want," said the muffled voice of the king, "is to finally tell them the truth. It has to come out some time, I say today."

"*Not* today," answered the queen. "I've agreed that we'll let Aylan choose. If we tell her before she's made up her mind, it'll sway her decision."

"A decision she should be making *after* having been presented with all the facts, Elle!"

"You can't have it both ways! You can't say it's unimportant, and then in the next breath say it's critical information! We'll tell Aylan about the…"

"Lan, what are you doing?"

Aylan shrieked and jumped back from the door. "Damn it, Liam!"

"Kids, is that you?" called the king.

"If you tell them I was eavesdropping, I'll tell them you were down on the beach this morning working on another ship," Aylan hissed. "Got it?"

Liam held up his hands in surrender. "Woah, Lany! All I'm trying to do is get some pancakes. Geez."

Liam pulled open the door, and Aylan followed him into the breakfast room.

"There you are!" said the queen, her voice full of sunshine. "I'm so glad you're finally up. Aylan, you'll need to eat quickly and then go put on your best pair of shoes, because we have a big surprise for you this morning."

Liam burst into laughter. "Wow, Lan, our parents have a surprise for you, and it involves wearing fancy shoes. Sounds right up your alley."

Aylan rolled her eyes. "Honestly, mom, what is it with you and shoes?"

"The right pair of shoes can change your life," answered the queen with the wink.

"Yes you've said that before — probably a million times — but you never explain how."

"And I won't today, either. Now, back to your surprise. Your father and I have decided that now that you're nearly eighteen, it's time you attended a proper school — and we're off to visit it just as soon as you've finished your breakfast."

"A school? That's what you were fighting about?"

"Told you she'd be watching," said the king with a smirk.

"I swear, if your godmother didn't insist on that dollhouse being in your room, I'd have it sent to the attic this instant," said the queen. "But yes, Aylan, we were discussing a school. It's a boarding school, strictly for princesses."

"But I already have Henriette to teach me about princess stuff."

"Well yes, dear, that's true…"

"And she can *keep* teaching you, if that's what you want," interrupted the king. "I think she's doing an excellent job."

"Thanks, dad."

"Yes, yes, of course she is. But Aylan, it's time we start thinking more about your future. As a princess, you're expected to attend this school. It's sort of a right of passage, if you will. All the princesses go."

"How do you feel about that Aylan?" asked her father with a tight-lipped grimace, which did not suggest his approval. "I, personally, find the expectations of the world overrated."

"Oh, for goodness sake!" cried the queen. "It's not like I'm saying 'all the princess are going to go jump off a cliff, and Aylan should too.' It's just a school!"

"Jumping off a cliff sounds way more fun than princess-school," offered Liam.

"Not helpful, son," said the king with a grin.

"So what do you think, Aylan?" asked the queen.

"I guess it'd be ok to at least go look. But if I decide to go, what will happen to Henriette?"

"Oh, I expect she'll turn all her attention toward refining Liam's manners," said the queen, looking pointedly at her son.

Liam's mouth was at that moment filled almost to capacity with pancakes and syrup, and when his eyes grew wide at the queen's comment, he looked very much like a terrified chipmunk. It was Aylan's turn to laugh. "Well in that case, maybe I should start packing now. Liam needs all the help he can get."

"Leeze dun lee me, An!" Liam choked through his food, trying desperately to swallow. "Leeze!"

The queen smacked her son lovingly on the side of his head, and the tension in the room cooled as the family laughed

together. Aylan decided there was no sense thinking any further about the school until she saw it, and talk turned to other things as she tucked into her breakfast.

Chapter Two

The Royal School for Girls turned out to be nearly three hours by coach straight down the coast from the Charming castle. Aylan decided that the name ought to be switched to 'The Royal School for *Royal* Girls,' for it was obvious once the place was in sight that not just any girl could attend.

"Is that it?" she asked, gesturing out the window at the white limestone structure high on a cliff in the distance.

"It is indeed," answered the king. "It looks just as I remember it."

"You've been there before?" asked Aylan, surprised. "When?"

"Oh, er, no, I meant… it looks just the way I remember it… from, uh, pictures. It used to be a fort you see, a long time ago. Obviously I'd have no reason to visit a girls' school, right?"

"It looks like one," answered Aylan.

"Hmm?"

"A fort. You said it was a fort, once. I can believe it."

"I agree it is a bit intimidating to look at, but the fantastic view of the sea from way up there more than makes up for the stark exterior. And the inside is beautiful as well. Or, uh, that's what I've been told. I think. I can't remember."

"Dad, are you ok? You're acting weird. Like, weirder than normal."

"Oh, um, yes. Totally fine. I just didn't realize we were already so close, and I haven't even begun to read these reports yet. I blame your mother. Her beauty is quite distracting in such close quarters as these."

The queen smiled. "I could always throw on some rags and streak ashes on my cheeks if that'll help you get back to your work."

"No my darling, that wouldn't work at all. In fact, if you did that, I'd end up more distracted than ever."

"Ok, now you're both being weird," interrupted Aylan. "And gross. If I end up going to this school, it'll be just so I can be rid of you."

"Whatever it takes to get you there," said the queen with a wink.

"Well now that puts me in a rather tight spot," mused the king. "On the one hand, my wife just opened the door for a make-out session in the carriage. At least, that's how I'd interpret 'whatever it takes.' On the other hand, I don't want to force my daughter into going to this school, which she's just suggested might happen if I don't stop flirting with her mother. Hmmm... decisions, decisions."

"I'm seriously going to go ride the rest of the way outside with the driver," said Aylan, getting up and reaching for the door. "I can't handle you two."

"No, no, stand down," said the queen with a laugh. "I surrender. I know you'd end up with the reins, and if we pull up to the most prestigious school in the world with our daughter driving the carriage, they'll probably send us away immediately."

"Oh, now this just gets better and better," said the king with an exaggerated eyebrow wiggle at his wife. "Make-out, then get kicked out."

"Your come-hither look is terrifying, darling, I want you to know that. Now get back to your reports. And Aylan, sit down. We're almost there."

In another half hour, the carriage finished the steep ascent up a winding road, and the Charming family arrived at the school at last. As they pulled up, Aylan spied several ladies waiting in the shade of an elegant veranda. They were arranged from tallest to shortest, all hands folded smartly before them, and all heads held stately high. When the carriage came to a stop, the ladies dipped into curtsies in unison.

"Do you think they'll really stay in that position until we get out?" asked Aylan.

"I don't know," said the king. "Should we wait and see? Their hamstrings have to be burning already."

"Can't you two ever be serious?" complained the queen, pulling a tasseled cord to let the footman know they were ready to depart the carriage. "We are not going to wait in here just to see how long those poor ladies can hold a curtsy. For goodness sake!"

The footman opened the door, and the ladies on the veranda dipped lower as the queen and Aylan were handed down, and then, somehow, even lower still when the king jumped to the ground.

"Well I'm impressed," whispered the king.

"That can't be good for their knees," murmured Aylan.

"Hush," warned the queen.

The ladies straightened at last, and a severe looking woman with the most perfectly round bun Aylan had ever seen stepped forward. "Your Majesties," she said, "we are so honored to have you here. I am Lady Dalrymple, the school's headmistress."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," said the queen. "We're so excited to be here. Your reputation as the best in the world is without dissent."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," said Lady Dalrymple, executing yet another curtsy. "Believe me when I say that your own reputation is certainly just as well known."

"And certainly just as glowing," added the king, putting an affectionate arm around his wife. Aylan glanced up at him; apparently she hadn't been the only one to hear the distinct chill in the headmistress's voice when addressing the queen.

"Indeed. Before we begin our tour, I'd like you to meet some of our instructors. Behind me are the heads of each subject, and I assure you, they are each the best in the world. Aside from being headmistress, I am also the instructor of etiquette. Princess Aylan, though you may have learned lovely manners under your governess's care, I shall help you to perfect every nuance. When you are through here, there will not be a king, sultan, or emperor in this world that you will not feel completely at ease addressing."

"And what if I feel that way already?" asked Aylan.

"Then perhaps you are overly confident," answered Lady Dalrymple coldly. "With all due respect."

The king cleared his throat. "Confident, yes. But not overly so. Please continue."

Lady Dalrymple nodded curtly. "Twice every day, you'll receive instruction in dance. As a future queen, we believe this is one of the most important skills you will need. Lady Amalaya has studied ballroom dancing in nearly every corner of the world —

"Every corner?" interrupted the king with a smile. "Now that is quite the accomplishment! I've never met a lady before who was well-trained in corner dancing. Most prefer to be front and center."

Aylan rolled her eyes. "Dad, your jokes are so lame," she whispered.

"Please excuse my husband," said the queen. "He thinks he's funny."

Lady Amalaya giggled. "I assure you, Your Majesty, that if corner-dancing were a style, I'd be an expert in that as well. Your daughter is in good hands with me. I suspect she will be a joy to teach, for I can see that she has natural grace."

"Yes, natural grace. That's our girl. Absolutely," said the king with a wide grin. Aylan discreetly stomped his foot.

Lady Bennet, the instructor of music, stepped forward next, followed by Lady Clementine, the instructor of embroidery. "Under your mother's tutelage, I'm sure your hands have become so nimble that you don't even need a thimble when you work," she said kindly. "I've seen your beautiful work in our village chapel, Your Majesty," she added with a curtsey to the queen.

Aylan nodded at the compliment, but she could feel her face going red. It was true that she didn't own a thimble, and that

was because she had always refused to participate in such a wretchedly tedious thing as sewing. Unfortunately Lady Goode, the last of the instructors to step forward, misinterpreted her embarrassment as humility, and assured Aylan she'd have plenty of time to display her skill in charitable acts class as well, when they made clothes and blankets for the village orphans.

"There's no need to be embarrassed, princess, when the praise is well deserved," she said sweetly.

"Truer words have never been spoken," proclaimed the king, clearly amused. He shifted his weight in an attempt to fend off another attack from his daughter's foot, but she knew him too well and landed her mark perfectly.

"Don't worry, Aylan," remarked Lady Dalrymple, ignoring the soft laughter of the instructors behind her, "I am quite sure you will live up to every expectation we have for you here."

Aylan suddenly felt her father stiffen at her side. "Yes," he said, in the deep voice he reserved for bringing his cabinet of advisors to order, "she will most certainly *exceed* every expectation."

"I have no doubt," answered Lady Dalrymple with another deep curtsey. "Now, shall we begin our tour?"

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Several hours later, Lady Dalrymple stood with Lady Clementine, watching the steadily retreating Charming family carriage.

"So, what did you think of our own Princess Aylan?" asked Lady Clementine. "I found her to be a sweet girl myself — perhaps in need of just a little polish. I believe it is good she will finally join us here."

"Do you?" murmured Lady Dalrymple.

"Do you not?"

Lady Dalrymple turned her gaze back toward the school. "Polish, you say, Lady Clementine? It's true, that's what we do here. And we're the best in the world at it. Ought that not afford us some measure of discretion?"

"Forgive me my lady, but I don't follow you."

"An artist, Lady Clementine. A jeweler, let's say. The very best in the world. Would he pluck a pebble from the side of the road and waste his talents on cutting and polishing it, even if such a thing were possible? Or would he rather spend his time polishing a diamond or an emerald? Something worthy of his skill?"

"The diamond, surely."

"Precisely. The more talent one has, the more discretion one should be afforded in where to spend it."

"Lady Dalrymple, surely… surely you aren't suggesting that Princess Aylan isn't worthy of what we could offer her here. Such a thought would not only be unkind, it'd be treasonous. She's a princess — she's our princess. No different than any of the others."

"Do you really believe that? There are no ears here but mine."

"I would never speak against the king's daughter."

"You were born in this country, and you are loyal to your king. I respect that Lady Clementine. But remember that Aylan is the queen's daughter too, and you'd never have deigned to spend your talent on her."

Lady Clementine sniffed. "She wouldn't have needed it. As I said, I've seen the queen's work; it's beautiful."

"My apologies. I forgot that yours is a subject even commoners must learn."

Lady Clementine stiffened but held her tongue.

"Ah, Lady Clementine, don't worry. This difference of opinion won't affect your position here. Like all the rest of my instructors, I shall only replace you when I find someone superior to you. This school is the best in the world, and I intend to keep it that way."

"And what of Princess Aylan?"

"I suppose we'll see if she can survive here. The family seemed impressed; I'm near certain she'll return."

"The other girls, though. Do you think —"

"It's not my place to interfere if they choose not to associate with her."

"I see."

Lady Dalrymple's eyes narrowed with a sudden thought. "Lady Clementine, have we received confirmation from Andala?"

"Why, yes, only yesterday. The King of Andala sent word his daughter will join us this year."

"We'll pair them together, then. Aylan shall be her suite-mate. That solves a problem quite nicely, does it not?"

"So you actually believe the rumors? About the queen of Andala?"

"I have sources — trusted sources — who swear the whispered rumors are true. So if there are to be two pebbles in my school this year, we may as well keep them together."

Chapter Three

Olivia DiBourgesse sat very still, studying her form in the mirror. She was pleased with what she saw: creamy, rose petal skin, and snapping green eyes the exact color of the emerald that rested against the hollow of her throat. Her hair hung in heavy auburn waves, brushing the curve of her slim waist, and the gown she wore was exquisite. Olivia DiBourgesse was beautiful… she was sure of it. The corners of her pink lips turned up in her best interpretation of a demure smile; it was an expression she practiced diligently.

The day before, Olivia had turned eighteen, and received the best possible gift. A messenger had arrived at the palace at dawn, having ridden all night. Olivia had eagerly waited for the news he carried every summer for the four years since her fourteenth birthday – or, more importantly, since the first day she would have been eligible to attend the Royal School for Girls. Fourteen was much younger than average for first year students, but Olivia was ambitious and had longed to go.

With each passing season, her resentment for the girl across the sea — the girl who was unknowingly holding her future hostage — had deepened. As her eighteenth birthday approached, Olivia began to fear that the foreign king had decided not to send his daughter to The Royal School at all, and that she was doomed to wait forever for a message that would never come. The thought of it terrified her, but she'd held to her patience, and now, finally, she was being rewarded: Aylan Charming had toured the Royal School, and her attendance was near certain.

Olivia glanced away from her own stunning reflection and reread the message resting on her dressing table. As she'd done every summer, Headmistress Dalrymple had sent a list of all the princesses expected to attend The Royal School in the coming term. Every time Olivia spied Aylan Charming's name on that list, she sighed deeply with relief. The anticipation of finally being able to put her careful plans into action was well worth the irritatingly large amount of gold Lady Dalrymple had demanded for such valuable information. Olivia had had her own father send word of her intention to attend the school immediately after reading this summer's note, and in a separate message, she'd sent her instructions — along with another irritating sum of gold — in the hope that the headmistress might follow them. She was near certain Lady Dalrymple felt as she did about the Charming family, but what she was asking her to do was skirting the line between impropriety and treason; hopefully her faith in the headmistress was well placed.

Olivia's eyes returned to her reflection. Somewhere out on the road, a small army of dressmakers, and a caravan of carriages laden with fabric, were making their way toward the palace where she sat, studying her reflection. Her new wardrobe would be

breathtaking; it would have to be, for there was much at stake. Olivia wondered whether it would be difficult to play at friendship with someone so far beneath her as Aylan Charming. Offensive, without question, but difficult? She thought not.

"Whatever the cost," she whispered to her reflection. It had been her mantra for years, and she meant it — for Olivia DiBourgesse had been born with a curse upon her, and she believed the Charming family was the key to finally breaking it.

"Whatever the cost," she said again, and then returned to practicing her smile.

Chapter Four

Aylan closed her eyes and turned her face to the sun. It had been a whirlwind month and she needed an escape from the chaos, so she'd come to the one place she knew of where no one would dare bother her. As she lay back against the soft earth, she pictured her surroundings in her mind's eye. There were tumbling billows of snowy-white blossoms filling the clearing where she lay, and the steep bank of the ravine that kept it secret from anyone who didn't know it was there. A stone wall surrounded the entire space, separating the flowers from the rest of the forest's flora, and protecting a small cottage that had been built directly into the granite face of the ravine. There were tales that a witch had built the cottage, and that she'd filled its garden with enchanted flowers that could never wither or die. Aylan had ventured into the woods at least once every winter since she was ten, drawn to the clearing to see if the stories of magic were true, and she'd never been

disappointed. The flowers were always as fresh and fragrant in February as they were in June.

The castle had been in an uproar preparing for her journey, though she was unsure when, or *if*, she'd ever officially made the decision to attend the Royal School. Her entire wardrobe had been emptied and inspected by the queen and a cadre of the finest seamstresses to be found anywhere. Most of her gowns, beautiful things that would have been fine on any other day, had been determined inadequate. They were too old, or the wrong color, too embroidered, or too plain. Even her under-things had mostly been replaced; in the queen's fervor to make her acceptable, nothing was sacred. Aylan had never seen such an assemblage of dresses: day gowns, nightgowns, ball gowns, morning dresses, dresses for tea, for dancing, and for walking in the garden, and all in the very finest fabrics. And then there were the *shoes*. Aylan could not remember with absolute certainty the dimensions of her dressing room at the school, but she doubted it could accommodate the work of a dozen talented cobblers working at fever pace for nearly a month. She was not even certain that they wouldn't need an extra carriage in the morning to transport them.

"Aylan, my darling, does your poor mother know you're lying about in the dirt?"

Aylan's eyes fluttered open at the familiar voice, and her mouth turned up in a grin. "Godmother!" she called to the woman standing at the top of the ravine. "You're back from your trip!"

"Well I couldn't very well let my beloved goddaughter leave for school without coming to see her off, could I? Or without bringing a gift, of course."

"I hope it's not more clothes," Aylan laughed. "Or shoes!" she added with a shiver.

A popping sound and a gasp of air, and suddenly her godmother was no longer at the top of the ravine, but instead standing just outside the stone wall's gate. "Heavens no. I've already given you one pair of shoes; how many more could you possibly need?"

Aylan laughed. "You really must teach me your method of travel someday. It took me nearly half an hour to hike down from where you just stood. And if it were up to my mother, the shoes you gave me would have been burned long ago. She's endlessly irritated by the fact that they seem to grow along with my feet, and that they never manage to stay lost, though she tries to lose them for me frequently."

"Oh, don't mind her, she knows better than to ever really burn those shoes. I gave her a very special pair of shoes once too, and they changed her life. Perhaps the shoes I gave you will do the same."

Aylan grinned at the beautiful dark-haired woman standing just outside the garden's gate. Though she'd known her godmother since the day she was born, she couldn't recall her as ever looking any different than she did at that moment, standing in the woods. It was as if she was frozen in time. "You know," said Aylan, "though I remember clearly the day you asked me never to question when you say something strange, it's certainly not easy when you drop such intriguing hints."

Her godmother laughed. "All in good time, my dear. Shall we get back to the castle?"

"Why don't you come sit with me and talk a while first? It's been ages since I last saw you."

"No, Aylan, never in that garden. We can catch up as we walk you back home."

"So you believe them, then? The tales about the magical flowers?"

"Do you not come to see them yourself each winter? Of course these flowers are magical."

"Yes, but the other part?"

"Do I believe that the witch who once lived in that cabin enchanted the flowers so that they would know the secrets of whoever passed through the garden, and whisper them aloud?"

"Yes."

"Yes, I do believe that. I knew the witch who lived here. She was a wonderful person who had a great sadness in her life. She valued truth above all else, and so when she built her home, she found a way to ensure it'd always be a place without secrets or lies."

"I can't imagine she had many visitors with a set-up like that," Aylan deadpanned.

"You'd be surprised," answered her godmother with a grin.

Knowing she'd get no more information, Aylan clambered up from the ground and smoothed her skirts. Once she was safely beyond the stone boundary, her godmother handed her a box wrapped in course burlap, and tied with a fine silk grosgrain ribbon.

"Interesting combination," Aylan mused.

"The high and the low. When you forget to label them as such, you begin to see how very beautifully they can go together."

"Is this a gift or a philosophy lesson?"

"Perhaps a bit of both, my love."

Aylan shook her head and peeled back the burlap. Inside was a polished wooden box that looked very much like the sort her mother's shoes arrived in from the royal cobbler. She looked up at her godmother, horrified. "But, you said…"

"Don't worry; it's not what you think. Yes, it's a shoebox, but I promise you there are no shoes inside. It will, however, hold all the shoes that have been made for you in the past month... and then some. I thought it might help with transportation if you don't need an entire carriage just to move them. Once you're at school you can use the box to stow whatever else you'd like. It's nice to have a place to keep your secrets hidden."

"It's enchanted?"

"It is indeed."

"Thank you, I love it!"

"That's not all. Look inside."

Aylan lifted the lid from the box and peered inside. Nestled in the polished interior was a book — a rather old book from the look of it, leather bound, with a golden crest stamped on its face in lieu of a title. Gently Aylan pulled it from the box and opened its cover. Inscribed on the first page was a note:

> *To my beloved goddaughter —*
>
> *Nothing you learn will be more important than knowing who you are. The most interesting of these stories shall be yours.*

Aylan began flipping through the pages… and then looked at her godmother with utter confusion. The pages were blank. Every single one of them.

"You seem confused," said her godmother with a laugh.

"Can you blame me?"

"What you have is a book of stories."

"Written in invisible ink?"

"Ha! No. The shoebox isn't just any shoebox, and this book isn't just any book. The stories it holds don't wish to be known to you yet, but they shall be important to you. When the time is right, you'll be able to read them."

"And that's probably another of those strange things you're prone to saying that you prefer I not ask about?"

"Precisely."

Aylan sighed. "Well, thank you. For the box, and the book. I look forward to reading it, umm, someday."

"You're welcome. For the box, the book, and the philosophy lesson, too. Now, shall we get back? It's your last evening at home, and I'm not sure whether your mother or poor Henriette will have a harder time letting you go."

"I guess so. I suppose we'll be using my method of travel?"

"Again, you suppose correctly. So we'd better get moving."

The two linked arms and began the slow hike through the forest and back to the castle.

Chapter Five

The mist was still heavy on the dunes, and the moon still bright on the horizon the next morning when eight perfectly-matched white horses pulled the glittering royal carriage up to the entrance of the Charming castle.

"Here we go," said the king. "Are you ready for this?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," answered Aylan. She watched as her multitude of trunks and parcels were loaded into two additional carriages, and smiled when she saw a maid stowing the enchanted box.

"Excited?" asked the king, narrowing his eyes. "You look like the cat who ate the canary right now."

"Yes, excited." She wasn't about to tell her father about the magical box — or its contents — until they were well away from the castle, and her mother's ears. The queen had tried her best to make sure Aylan's favorite pair of brown clogs — the shoes her

godmother had gifted her so long ago never made it to The Royal School, but Aylan had found them buried in the massive pile of her "old" clothes and ferreted them away in the box. She felt smug at the victory.

"Who do you think is crying harder inside right now, your mother or Henriette?"

"I don't know. Mom's lip got a little quivery as she was hugging me, but having me go to this school is apparently fulfilling one of her major life goals… So my money is actually on Liam. Henriette is definitely crying a *little*, but with all her time now free to keep Liam out of trouble, his illicit adventures down to the shipyard are about to be seriously curtailed — so I bet he's crying a *lot*."

The king grinned. "We really do need to do something about your brother and his ship-building fascination don't we? If he weren't succeeding me as king, I'd have had him apprenticed to an architect years ago."

"I think the building is a means to an end. It's the sailing he loves."

"The sailing, and the horseback riding, and the shooting… just like his pretty sister," said the king, tweaking Aylan's nose affectionately.

"Yes, well, it's a good thing I learned all the fun stuff before you had me carted off."

"You don't think advanced ballroom dancing and intermediate-level embroidery sound fun?"

"No. Not even slightly."

The footman opened the door of the carriage and then immediately stepped aside to let the king climb up first. Aylan was surprised at the change in protocol, but took the opportunity to

have one last long stare at the castle that had been her only home. When her father was settled, the footman held out a white-gloved hand to help her up, but just as she grasped it, he pulled her back.

"For you, Your Highness," he whispered, slipping her a lumpy cloth-wrapped package. "From Prince Liam. He said to keep it hidden."

Aylan raised a surprised eyebrow, but obediently slipped the package into the wide velvet sleeve of her traveling gown before climbing into the carriage. The door shut behind her, and they were on their way.

The pair was expected at the fortress on the cliff no later than eleven o'clock. A brunch had been planned for all the incoming girls and their families, and after that the king would leave, and Aylan would be on her own. She was trying hard not to think of it.

"So," said the king after the castle had disappeared from view, "do you think you'll be able to resist opening your love letter for the entire length of our journey?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The footman didn't hand you up first as he should have. I assume it was because he wanted to give you something."

"Oh," said Aylan. "No. It was something from Liam."

"Well that's good. I was worried more members of my staff were in love with you. Didn't want to have to start firing people."

Aylan grinned. "Nope, only Gunner." Her brother's best friend worked in the stables, and had been proposing to her constantly for years. It had become a well-worn family joke.

"Go on then, if it isn't a love letter, let's see what you've got. Whatever it is, I won't tell your mother."

Aylan reached into her sleeve and pulled out the package. The muslin wrapping was held together by a crudely-tied bow, and the obvious fact that Liam had wrapped the gift himself sent a pang through her chest. She pulled at the ribbon, and inside found a small slingshot, beautifully designed but roughly carved, and unmistakably the work of Liam's own hand. The handle he'd whittled to look like a ship, with one arm the mast and the other the prow. Aylan pulled back the leather thong and listened appreciatively to the '*twang*' it made as it snapped forward.

"You'll want to keep that hidden at school," laughed the king. "I'd hate to see you expelled."

"Would you?"

"Actually, no. I'd love it if they kicked you out of that stuffy old school. Your mother might never recover though, so if it happens, I'll swear upon my crown that I never saw that weapon of yours or knew anything about it."

Aylan tucked the slingshot back into her gown. "What weapon?"

"Exactly. You're both tactful and duplicitous; you'll make an excellent queen someday, Lan."

"Duplicitous? I'm not sure that's a trait one looks for in a ruler, is it?"

"You're probably right. I think shooting any prince that gets too close is also frowned upon, but I'm fine with you doing that as well. In fact," he said, pulling out a leather pouch filled with silver pieces, "I actually insist upon it. So why don't you practice your shooting now, while we've some time?"

Aylan laughed and pulled the slingshot out again. For the rest of the trip, the king pointed out rocks or trees to shoot at, and Aylan worked on her aim. She was sure the villagers would be

delighted to wake and find the ground along the road littered with silver; she was equally sure the secret of how it got there would be safe with her father. Of all the precious people she was leaving behind, it was the king she'd miss the most.

Chapter Six

Olivia DiBourgesse's carriage pulled onto the curving drive in front of The Royal School just as the sun was rising over the watery horizon. She'd been en route for nearly two weeks — first at sea, and then by carriage — but she still looked dazzling and refreshed as she was handed down by her footman. Blinking in the early morning light, Olivia appraised her surroundings. The castle was nothing compared to the one she'd grown up in, but even she could appreciate the commanding presence it afforded looking out over the sea.

Behind Olivia, her older cousin Bianca stepped lithely from the carriage. Bianca had begun her time at The Royal School two months after her fifteenth birthday, and remained there four years. She'd married well, and was now the dauphine of a small country to the northeast of her uncle's kingdom. It was a role that gave Bianca a great deal of pride, yet despite her lofty stature in the

world, everyone knew that someday it would be usurped by Olivia's. Never once had her younger cousin set her mind to something she had not ultimately accomplished, and this instance would certainly bear no difference; Bianca's days as the jewel of her family were numbered.

The last to depart the carriage was Olivia's twin brother, Garrick. He was strikingly handsome, rugged and suntanned with dark waving hair and the same shocking emerald green eyes as his sister. Those eyes took in the view without being the least bit impressed.

"How quaint it is, Olivia. Is this seriously the place you've been so eager to come to for the past four years?"

"Shut up, Garrick. You know that any girl who's ever been worth anything came here first. As a female, I don't have the luxury of being able to inherit a country like you do, even though I *am* seven minutes older. Besides, your own wife will probably come out of this school, so you may want to try and look less dour. I'd hate for you to make a bad impression this early on."

Garrick rolled his eyes, but did stand up straighter. "Well then, Liv, do you think it's safe to go inside and see where you'll be staying until we can sell you off to the highest bidder? Hopefully we'll have all your things unpacked before the roof of this old rock pile caves in."

"You're such a snob, you know that? And we both know *exactly* who that highest bidder is going to be."

"Whatever you say," he answered, offering his arm to escort her in.

"You're going to miss me, you know."

"Miss you? You've insisted I camp out at the Earl of Marisette's townhouse down in the village for what sounds like a

very indeterminate amount of time. I think it's clearly you who are worried about missing *me.*"

Olivia took his arm and allowed him to lead her in. In truth, she was thrilled her brother had agreed to pay a long visit to the Earl. The plans she had for the school year were complex, and it was comforting to have an ally nearby who understood. Everything was going to work out just as she wanted. "I'm so happy to finally be here," she murmured. "It's finally happening, at last."

"Game on," her brother answered quietly.

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It took exactly twenty-six minutes for the multitude of servants to get Aylan completely moved into her new room. Dresses were unpacked and repressed in a cloud of lavender scented steam before being hung in the waiting cedar-lined bureau. The curtained bed was stripped of its fine silk sheets and redressed with fresh new ones. ('Fresh' being a matter of perspective, as the ones so unceremoniously dumped down the laundry chute had certainly never been slept on.) Aylan began to resent the terrible efficiency of her father's staff. She'd been counting on having at least an hour or two to settle in before all the familiar faces that had surrounded her since birth abandoned her, yet here they were, working away like dervishes, and slipping out as their tasks were completed.

Nearly all the maids and most of the porters stopped to wish Aylan luck or murmur a kind word before departing. She saw Lucy, the shy girl who'd always tended the fire in her bedchamber, put a cloth-wrapped bundle beneath her pillows, and old Ryden, the groom to Palisade, put a framed sketch of the horse on her

bedside table. Neither of them ought to have been there; their jobs didn't require them to haul or unpack luggage like the porters or wardrobe attendants. Aylan could only guess that they, and a number of the others, had volunteered for the journey to see her off. Tears threatened to overcome her for maybe the twentieth time that day.

Abruptly, all the work was done, and Aylan was left standing alone beside her father in a room that now felt three sizes too big. The king hooked his finger beneath her chin and lifted her face to inspect it.

"Oh Lany, you're breaking my heart being so damn grown up! I feel I'd like to throw you in one of those trunks and take you back home this instant. Or maybe lock you up in a tower with no door like your crazy great-great-grandfather did to your great-grandmother." He paused to take in her expression. "Come with me," he said, "I have something to show you."

The king led Aylan down the corridor toward the front of the school, and into a marble gallery filled with portraits. He stopped before one at the center of the room, and stood silently for a moment, allowing Aylan to take in the countenance of the woman in the frame. She was young, no more than a year or two older than Aylan, and she looked like she was up to something. Her eyes seemed to dance even on the lifeless canvas, and her pink lips turned up at the corners like she was just about to laugh. Around her neck and shoulders hung an astonishingly intricate swirling silver necklace, laced heavily with opulent sapphires and diamonds.

"Who is she?" Aylan asked, intrigued.

"She is your great grandmother, Rapunzel DeByron. She was the human embodiment of a hurricane, and a true delight to everyone who knew her. I remember her only a very little of

course, but her stories are still legendary — you might even hear a few during your time here. During her first year she was wildly popular, and sovereigns the world over were already bargaining with your great-great-grandfather to secure her as a wife for their sons. But of course Rapunzel would hear of none of it. One day she snuck out in sailors' clothes that she'd bribed a chambermaid to bring her and, calling herself Pun, boarded a ship that ultimately landed on the same beach you've been playing on most of your life. It was there that she met your great-grandfather as he was riding by on his horse, and fell instantly in love with him. Of course, there were some complicated bits in the middle: figuring out how to tell him that she was not only a princess, but a *female*, for one. And then explaining why she was wearing sailors' rags. But once he knew her, he fell under her spell just like everyone else. They formed a secret engagement, and Rapunzel sailed back to school, hoping to find no one the wiser.

It was a foolish hope of course; the absence of a spitfire like Rapunzel certainly didn't go unnoticed for very long. Her father immediately had her shipped back home when he found out, and he locked her up in a tower with no door and only one window. He declared that she'd not be allowed out until her hair was long enough to make a ladder to climb down with, assuming that by that time, she'd have matured into the docile young princess she was meant to be. It's ironic that someone with so little humor should have a daughter with such an abundance of it.

Regardless, hair only grows about six inches a year, so if he'd actually stuck by his edict, poor Rapunzel would have been in her seventies by the time she got down. Luckily, your great-grandfather Charming came to her rescue and bargained with the king for Rapunzel's release *and* her hand in marriage. He climbed

up a horsehair ladder and carried her down himself — and from then on they were never separated.

My point in telling you all of this, Aylan, is that I see a lot of your grandmother in you. She was a woman who reached for the life she wanted with both hands. That's a trait that ought to be admired, not suppressed. So even though you're here to become a lady and a queen, keep your sparkle too. Ok?"

"Ok," Aylan whispered.

"This is for you. It belonged to her, as you see, but I think it might look just as lovely on you." He pulled Rapunzel's elaborate silver necklace from his pocket and fastened it around Aylan's neck. It seemed to float above her skin — she barely felt the weight of it — and the stones felt strangely warm to the touch.

"Just know that if you decide to run off and be a pirate, I won't care so long as you're happy. And if your mother locks you in a tower I'll try to spring you in a reasonable amount of time."

"Thanks, dad," Aylan said, blinking rapidly to hold back tears.

"You're stronger than you know," said the king. "And I'm so proud of the young woman you're becoming. Now let's go get changed; it's almost time for brunch, and there are some people I can't wait for you to meet."

Chapter Seven

Though Olivia generally preferred to make a memorable entrance, she decided that on this particular morning it would serve her interests more to be early, rather than fashionably late. Thus, when the gentleman butler called her name to announce her arrival at the brunch, it was to a mostly empty ballroom.

"Well this looks like one heck of a party," her brother said, with an exaggerated yawn.

Olivia rolled her eyes. "Honestly, Garrick, they're really going to let you command our country's army someday? It's called *strategy*. We can choose the best place to wait to watch the others come in."

"Excellent. I propose we wait near the food. I'm starving."

"And I propose we wait in the corner opposite. I want to see *them* before they see *us*."

"And *I* propose you two make up your minds quickly," interrupted Bianca. "I've no idea what nonsense you're going on about, but there are others waiting to come in."

Garrick lent an arm to each of the princesses, and they made their way to an elegantly draped table in the far corner of the room. "Perfect," said Olivia, as she took a proffered flute of champagne from a white-gloved servant.

"You really shouldn't be drinking that," said Bianca. "You're supposed to be making a good first impression today, and this room will soon be filled with the sovereigns of nearly every powerful country in the world. Not the best time to be letting bubbles go to your head."

"Relax, Bianca, I know what I'm doing," answered Olivia curtly.

"Do you? We're dallying in the corner of the room instead of mingling with the other guests, and we got here entirely too early for you to make a proper entrance. I'm not sure you know what you're doing at all."

"Leave her be," cut in Garrick softly. "You've had your chance at this, and you did well. But Livy doesn't need help; she knows what she's doing."

Bianca huffed, but pressed her point no further, and Olivia, pleased with her brother's loyalty, was allowed to watch the arrival of the glittering assemblage in silence. She noted with keen interest the appearance of every new princess, mentally weighing each of their looks and attire against her own. Thus far, she was satisfied with the state of her competition.

"I'm sorry, but is there someone in particular you're waiting to see?" Bianca asked testily after several more minutes.

"Aylan Charming," answered Olivia and Garrick together — in perfect unison with the call of the gentleman butler. The trio's eyes turned to the top of the staircase just in time to see the princess step forward on the arm of her father, and Olivia was annoyed to hear the slight sound of her brother's breath catching in his throat.

"She's quite pretty," murmured Bianca.

"I don't know," answered Olivia, "I don't really see anything special about her." She took in the sight of Aylan from top to toe. Irritatingly, she was rather pretty, though not quite beautiful in the classic sense. Her eyes seemed just slightly over-large for her heart-shaped face, and both were nearly overwhelmed by the thick waves of golden hair that tumbled over her shoulders and down her back. "I don't know what on earth she's thinking wearing her hair down like that. She looks quite common, I think. Not that *that's* surprising."

"Olivia, that's unkind. Garrick, what do you think of Princess Charming? Was she worth the inexplicable wait?"

"Er, yes, she… I mean, no. Olivia was the one waiting for her, not me."

"But do you find her pretty?"

"She has very beautiful eyes."

Olivia glared at her brother. "You can't even see her eyes from this distance. They're probably the color of dirty dishwater."

"Honestly, Olivia!" hissed Bianca, "what's gotten into you? Aylan's father is the ruler of one of the most powerful countries in the world, one that you'll be living in for at least the next two years, and Aylan is the younger sister of his only son. There are ears everywhere in this school; if you're half as clever as you think you

are, you'll never utter such criticism again. Certainly not until after you're married, at least!"

"Oh, don't worry," said Garrick. "Olivia and Aylan are going to be best friends. Olivia's been planning it for years."

"Yes, and I believe it's time I put my plan into action. Garrick, you better stay with Bianca while I go introduce myself; I'd hate for you to become too distracted by her beautiful eyes, and forget who you are. Or who she is."

Garrick rolled his eyes, but Olivia thought she saw a trace of disappointment in her brother's face. "Livy," he asked, as she was about to walk away, "do you think she knows?"

Olivia looked again at Aylan, standing in the distance. The other princess held her head gracefully high, and though her hair hung loose, it was swept behind her shoulders so as not to shield her face. Nothing in her appearance suggested anything but confidence, and ease in her surroundings. "No," answered Olivia thoughtfully. "No, I don't think she has any idea."

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Were he aware of the ambush that awaited him, King Charming still could not have made slower work of their forward journey. He was delighting in introducing his daughter to all his old friends, and watching her charm each and every one of them. Not once did anyone look on her less than kindly, and most seemed wholly taken with her easy manners and sweet demeanor. Thus far, she was an absolute success, and he was beginning to take on a bit of a swagger. *What in the world have we been so worried about all these years?*

"Edward, you old devil, how are you?" King Charming cried, clapping a slightly older man on the back. "Your wife still palling around with those dwarves? It's been ages since I last saw you!"

"Ah, Charming! I was hoping you'd be here! But where is Elle?"

"Home with Liam. He tends to get in a bit of trouble when left on his own too long."

"Trouble?"

"You know, the usual. Raiding the armory, trying to circumnavigate the globe in a bourbon barrel. Basically our main concerns with Liam are accidental dismemberment and drowning."

"Boys," said King Edward knowingly.

"Boys," agreed King Charming.

"What you need is a spare heir. Then you wouldn't have to worry so much."

"Completely unnecessary. Should the need ever arise, I'll simply borrow one of yours."

King Edward laughed heartily, and turned to Aylan. "I have six sons, you see. My wife is rather fond of having little people running around. I have an idea," he added, with a wink. "Perhaps young Aylan here could take one of them off my hands for me?"

"Send Aylan to marry one of your spares, and live so far away? Never. You'd tell her far too many tales of our youthful indiscretions, and embellish them terribly. Besides, I'm in no rush to marry off my girl."

"Agreed. My sons I could do with fewer of, but my daughter is a treasure." King Edward reached around and drew forward a petite, raven-haired girl who'd been waiting patiently at his side.

"This is Rafaela, my youngest. This will be her first year here as well, and it would give me such pleasure if you two girls became friends."

King Charming smiled indulgently as he watched Aylan and Rafaela introduce themselves and begin speaking eagerly of everything they'd seen in the school thus far. His own friends had always jokingly noted how well he lived up to his surname, and it pleased him that although she'd grown up far too sheltered for his liking, Aylan appeared to be another 'charming Charming.'

After a few moments with King Edward, he steered his daughter back into the crush of guests and continued her introductions. She seemed more and more confident with each meeting, and he was delighted when she began offering her own quick wit as a counterpoint to his roguish humor. It was in this jaunty spirit of success, after they'd worked the entire room and were finally headed for refreshment, that a young woman stepped into their path and dipped into a quick curtsey. King Charming was immediately stuck by the familiarity of her uniquely beautiful features, but he was sure he'd never met the girl before.

"Forgive me for interrupting you," she said sweetly, "but I was just so eager to meet you. I've heard a lot about you."

"Have you, now?" he answered, still struggling to place her. "I hope you've ignored at least half of what you've heard, if you've heard it from the crowd in this room. Especially King Edward over there."

"No, I've a far more reliable source," she answered. "It's my mother who's told me so much."

King Charming froze. *Of course.* He should have known her instantly from the startling emerald green of her eyes; after all, he'd spent a number of years dreaming of just such a pair of eyes in

another equally lovely face, and no one but *her* daughter could ever possess their equal. Without thinking, he pulled Aylan closer to his side.

"Of course, you must be Olivia!" he exclaimed, hoping she hadn't sensed his discomfort. "I'm surprised I didn't realize it the moment I saw you, for you look very much like your mother did at your age. She was — she is — a stunning woman, and you favor her tremendously. How is she? Well, I hope?"

"She's quite well, Your Highness, though she couldn't be here today."

"That's too bad," King Charming answered, hoping the relief he felt wasn't too evident in his face. "It would have been so nice to see her again after all these years."

"Do you think so?" asked Olivia. "I wonder whether she'd agree? Although, I'm sure she'd have been rather curious to meet your wife."

"She'd have been disappointed then; unfortunately my wife was also unable to be here today."

"I'm not surprised. A gathering like this would probably have been a bit much for someone like her."

King Charming bristled at the presumptuous remark. "Not at all," he answered. "I simply needed someone at home to keep tabs on the kingdom and on our son, Liam, and she's my most trusted advisor in both those areas. I hope you'll have the pleasure of meeting her someday soon, but for now, I can at least introduce you to our daughter. Olivia, may I present *Princess* Aylan Charming?"

From the quick, confused glance she shot him, the king knew that even Aylan had heard how much extra emphasis he'd put on the word 'princess' in her title.

"Of course," purred Olivia, suddenly sweet again. "Aylan, its so wonderful to meet you. I really do hope we'll become the very best of friends."

"It's nice to meet you too," stammered Aylan. "I was nervous to come, but already everyone has been so kind."

"Yes, I agree, everyone is *so* friendly. At least, today they are. But of course, we're all on our best behavior on day one, right? It's day two that I wonder about. But I'm sure you aren't like that, so we really must be friends. Perhaps we can sit together at breakfast tomorrow?"

"Umm, yes, of course," Aylan answered. "I'd like that."

"Perfect, I'll see you then. But for now, I'll leave you two to your brunch. King Charming, may I send your regard to my mother?"

"My very highest," answered King Charming.

Olivia curtseyed again, and both King Charming and Aylan stared open-mouthed as she melted back into the crowd.

"What in the world was that?" asked Aylan.

"Damn," thought the King. Apparently Aylan had picked up on the awkwardness of the interaction. *How could she not? Now is the moment, Charming. It's time to tell her. Today went perfectly, there's no reason to keep it from her any longer…*

"Er, I don't know, Lany. That's the thing about royals. Some of them can be a bit strange, and you just have to roll with it. Have I ever told you about my second cousin, Mildred? Now *there* was an odd bird…"

King Charming continued his amusing tale as he led Aylan across the room. Once again, the opportunity to tell her the truth had presented itself, and he'd once again let it pass him by.

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"Well?" asked Garrick, when his sister circled back around the room to meet him, "what did you find out?"

"I needled King Charming just enough to make sure Aylan really has no idea. She doesn't. You should have seen how uncomfortable he looked when he realized who I was. My plan is going to work perfectly."

"I don't know, Livy. Have you been watching her? Everyone seems to be receiving her so well."

"Oh please. Of course everyone's been kind to her. How could they not with her father here? We're in his country for goodness sake. By tomorrow it'll all be different, and she'll have no idea why she's being shunned."

"Except by you, of course."

"Of course. She'll be so grateful, she'll be eating out of my hand. There's no way she won't help me get what I want."

"And you're sure you still want it?"

"Garrick, don't start with that nonsense again. Of course it's what I want. I'm sick of being cursed! Now let's go get some food."

Garrick lent Olivia his arm and led her away. For some reason though, he found his eyes continually returning to the girl on the other side of the room. The girl with the long golden hair and the eyes he really did find beautiful. The girl who had no idea what was in store for her tomorrow.

Chapter Eight

At the end of what felt like the longest day of her life, Aylan was finally alone in her room, and with her thoughts. From her bed she could hear someone moving around in the suite next door, and she wondered vaguely which of the girls she'd met would be her new neighbor. That introduction would have to wait until morning; Aylan was exhausted and wanted nothing but to replay the day's events in her head until she fell asleep. She reached over to snuff out the candle on her bedside table, but just before she did, she noticed something that made her pause: the book her godmother had given her was sitting out on the table, yet she was sure it had been tucked into the locked drawer of her writing desk before.

"Godmother, are you here?" she called, not knowing whether she expected an answer. None came. Aylan reached for the book and turned open the cover, her godmother's words from

the forest echoing in her ears. *These are stories that do not wish to be known to you yet…but when the time is right, you'll be able to read them.*

"It looks like the time is right," whispered Aylan, staring down at several pages that had been blank, but were now filled with scrolling words in deep bronze ink. Her eyelids suddenly feather light, Aylan propped herself up on her pillows and began to read:

The Story of the Prince and the Cinder Girl

Once upon a time, there lived a prince called Charming, who could never seem to make up his mind. He was a pleasant boy, who grew up to be a pleasant man. No one who knew him could help but be fond of him, and he, in turn, found good in everyone. Prince Charming floated through life until his eighteenth birthday, when his father, the king, decided it was time for the boy to marry. Never having been good at making decisions, Prince Charming was relieved when his father told him that an alliance had been formed, and that in three years' time he would marry a princess from a country across the sea.

Tales of his intended's beauty were known the world over, and this only heightened Prince Charming's eagerness to marry her. He didn't worry that he wouldn't love her; after all, he'd never met anyone that he couldn't find at least a little affection for, so surely… surely he'd love his wife.

As with all the girls in the world lucky enough to be the daughters of kings, the prince's fiancé was sent to a particular school to learn the art of royalty — a school that was within Prince Charming's own country. A meeting was

arranged for the pair, and a carriage sent to retrieve her. When it arrived back at his castle, Prince Charming bounded down the steps and pushed past the footman, that he might help his betrothed down himself.

He gasped when he saw her for the first time. She was more beautiful than even the most incredible of the tales had promised. Prince Charming felt so overwhelmed by her stunning green eyes, that he thought he must indeed be in love with her already. He kissed her hand, and presented her with an emerald ring inscribed with the words: 'Here is my heart, which I entrust to your hand. Keep it well.' She promised to never take it off.

For two years, the pair continued on in this way. The princess visited the Charming castle often, determined to learn everything she could about the place she was soon to call home, and the man she was soon to call her husband. The prince repaid her visits in kind, though his motivation was somewhat different: for after the initial shock of her beauty wore off, Prince Charming found that the depth of the affection he felt for her was no more than what he felt for anyone else. He hoped that if he only spent enough time with her, the feeling would grow into the true love he longed for, but alas, at the end of two years, when the princess's education had come to an end and she was to depart for her own country, Prince Charming still felt that he could have been equally happy were he engaged to any of the other princesses he'd met while visiting at her school.

As her ship glided out of the harbor, and he waved from the pier, the prince felt a sense of resignation. Perhaps, thought he, it is my lot to have affection for everyone, and true

love for none. Certainly that is a happy circumstance, and not one to mourn! I am engaged to a beautiful woman whom I esteem; there is no reason on earth not to be happy. In his heart, he found himself unable to fully embrace the decision to be content, and though he knew he was not one to fully embrace any decision, this time it troubled him. He fervently hoped that absence would, at last, make his heart grow fonder.

Prince Charming went back home, to await the return of his bride in one year. Within that span, his father, the king, celebrated the anniversary of his ascension to the throne, and ordered a magnificent ball to mark the occasion. All in the land were invited to attend, and a festive atmosphere filled the country. The prince wrote to his fiancé, describing the pomp and grandeur of the preparations. 'I wish more than anything that you could be with me tonight,' he ended the letter, and he wished that wish was sincere.

The ball was indeed magnificent. Prince Charming stood at his father's right hand to receive their hundreds of guests, and then wandered the ballroom, dancing and glorying in meeting all the people who lived in the kingdom that would one day be his. He told himself for the hundredth time that it was surely a blessing to feel such affection for everyone, and in that moment, he almost believed it.

A clock somewhere began to chime, and Prince Charming glanced up to check the hour. As he did, his eyes fell upon a girl who was just then making her way down the grand staircase and into the ballroom. Though she was dressed in a gown that any princess would be proud to wear, with jewels sparkling at her throat and in her golden hair, the girl seemed dazzled by the glittering crowd. She hesitated at

the bottom stair, taking in the scene with wide eyes. Prince Charming was mesmerized.

After a moment, the girl took a deep breath and squared her shoulders — then stepped down into the crush of guests. The observation of that one small bit of bravery was all it took to lift the weight completely from Prince Charming's heart and mind. "I'm sure I want to meet her," he said.

He hurried through the crowd until he stood before her, but when the girl's warm brown eyes turned up to meet his, the easy charm that had carried him so well through life utterly failed. In fact, he found himself unable to even speak.

"Hello," she said after a moment. "I'm Elle."

"Dance with me," he whispered.

"I'm sorry?"

"Dance with me," he said again.

"Are you sure? You see, this is my first ball. I've never actually danced before."

"I'm sure," he answered. And for once, he really meant it.

For the rest of the night, they shared every dance, and he reveled in her smiles and conversation. Never had he been so absolutely beguiled by a woman. Just as he was forming the words to declare himself, the clock began to strike midnight, and before he realized what was happening, she was gone from his arms, fleeing into the night. He tried to chase after her, but the only sign he could find that she'd been there at all was a single glass shoe.

For nine days the prince searched for the girl from the ball, without success. On the tenth day a woman came and asked to speak with him. She'd heard of the prince's search

from a friend in the palace and claimed to know of a girl who matched the description of the one he sought.

"She's not what you'd expect though," warned the woman. "She's a servant, and a lowly one at that. She tends the fireplaces at a house in the village, but on the night of the ball I'm sure I saw her leaving the house in a beautiful gown and glass slippers. It was a sight I'd not soon forget."

"Do you know her name?" begged the prince.

"Elle, I believe, is her name. But the ladies of the house taunt her with the name Cinder-elle instead."

Prince Charming leapt from his throne and immediately set out for the house the woman described. When he arrived, he found the girl from the ball at last. She was covered in grime from the hearth where she slept, and looked every inch the servant — yet when she glanced up and saw him there, she didn't hide. She squared her small shoulders, just as she'd done at the ball, and faced him with warm brown eyes.

Prince Charming dropped to his knees. "Marry me," he said.

"Are you sure?" she whispered.

"I'm sure." And from that moment on, he was.

The princess across the sea was devastated when she learned the news. She sent back the emerald ring with a note: "Here is your heart, which never belonged to me. I do not hope to receive mine in return, for I gave it away completely."

The End

Aylan felt as though all the air had left the room. It was her parents' story. Had their names not been so clearly spelled out in the shimmering ink, there still would've been no doubt in her mind. Suddenly a million small details flooded her memory; things that at the time had never given her pause, but now taken collectively left her wondering how her parents had ever managed to keep this secret from her for so long. Every time she'd had the sense that someone was slighting her mother in some way or speaking down to her… her father's earlier insistence on introducing her as *Princess* Aylan Charming, and the fact that he'd clearly lied about never having been to the school before… even the fact that her mother had chosen not to make the journey to attend the morning's festivities… all were for the simple fact that her mother was a peasant. And everyone had known it, except her.

She recalled Olivia's words from earlier: *Surely a gathering like this would have been a bit much for someone like her.*

Someone like her.

"Oh no, Olivia!" Aylan gasped. "Olivia is her daughter. She has to be. The woman my father was once engaged to… oh no."

Aylan threw herself down on the bed, trembling with tears. *How could they not have told me?* She had nearly decided to begin packing her belongings to return home, when a small knocking sound broke through her haze of self-pity. Suddenly alert, she ceased her sobbing and sat up. There it was again — a light knocking coming from the other side of the door that led to the bathroom.

"Go away," she muttered. Quickly she wiped under her eyes, and smoothed her nightgown. She was just beginning to hope that whoever it was had given up, when she heard the knock for a

third time. Good manners prevailing, Aylan got up and went to the door.

"Hello!" said the girl who appeared as the door swung open. She had deep caramel skin, dark almond-shaped eyes, and a long braid of chestnut hair. "I heard you awake over here and decided to come say hi. I'm Gala. Can I come in?"

"Gala? Your name is Gala? What, did your mother like parties or something?" Aylan instantly realized the rudeness of her words and felt her cheeks flush pink. "I'm sorry, that was unkind. It really is nice to meet you. I'm Aylan. And of course you can come in if you want, but you've caught me at a somewhat unusual moment —"

"Oh, I'm sure you're not the only one in this castle crying tonight. I had a few tears too when I left my parents — who, by the way, are rather private and don't like parties. So I guess I *am* their party. Yay me!"

Aylan smiled despite herself. It was the kind of joke her dad would make.

"Are you having trouble sleeping?" asked Gala.

"You could say that."

"Me too. I've never been so far from home. And to come here… it just feels like there's so much pressure, you know? We're literally here so they can teach us to be perfect in every way. But what if that isn't even possible?" Gala glided into the room as she spoke, barely rustling her nightdress. Aylan had never seen anyone move so gracefully. It was… unsettling.

"So you're nervous? About classes?"

"No, not that exactly. It's just… well, I don't know if someone like me will really be able to fit in here."

"That's ridiculous, why wouldn't you fit in here?" asked Aylan.

"Oh, I have my reasons. I'm sorry, I know this must seem very strange, and you can kick me out whenever you want, but when I heard you awake, I decided to just come over before I lost my nerve."

"Your nerve?"

"Yes. But she told me I could trust you, and she told me I should confide in you, so that's what I'm going to do."

"Who told you that?" asked Aylan, feeling more confused by the second. "Confide what in me?"

"It's probably easier if I just show you," answered Gala. "I can't believe I'm actually doing this," she added, before lifting the floor-length hem of her nightdress.

Aylan gasped.

Gala's feet were hovering several inches above the ground.

"I'm a fairy, you see. Well, a half-fairy. My mom is a full-blood fairy."

Aylan sank down onto a nearby chair, and took in the sight of Gala from top to toe. "And you keep this a secret?" she finally asked. "Is it a bad thing to be a fairy?"

"Is that a real question?" asked Gala.

"Of course it's a real question, that's why I asked it!"

"Yes, I keep it secret. As does my mother. It's forbidden for us to acknowledge what we are."

"But…why?"

"Seriously, are you messing with me? I thought you'd throw me out the minute you heard. You really don't know about the fairies?"

"Only what I've read in stories. And I suspect my godmother might be one. But other than that, no, I know nothing about fairies."

"Wow, Aylan, you must have had a very sheltered upbringing."

"Yes, I'm beginning to realize that," answered Aylan without humor. "So why is it bad to be a fairy?"

"I'm sorry, but if you don't know… I can't tell you. That's also forbidden. We never speak of it."

"I see. Sounds like there are a lot of rules when you're a fairy."

"A lot," Gala agreed.

"So then why did you bother telling me at all?"

"A woman I met just outside the castle this morning. She told me you and I were to be suite-mates, and also friends, and she told me I should trust you with my secret. I'd never seen her before, but she was so obviously a fairy, too… and I liked the idea of having a friend I could be myself around."

"She was *obviously* a fairy?" asked Aylan, her interest piqued. "Is there a way you can tell? Do all of you float?"

"Ha, no. Floating is rare these days. True flying even more so. All fairies have gifts, generally one or two that come through stronger than the others, but they vary greatly. I've never met anyone but my mother and I who float."

"So how did you know?"

"It's hard to explain, but it has to do with one of my gifts. Other than the floating, which I really don't like very much, I have a talent for sensing things that are hidden. And since all fairies live in hiding now, I can usually detect when one is near. This one was different though. I don't think she necessarily cares if humans can

tell she's different, so I didn't sense anything magical about her until I'd almost passed right by."

"But when you did?"

"She met my eyes, looked pointedly at the hem of my dress, and then gestured that I should follow her. She was really lovely; dark hair and beautiful pale skin. But even though her face was smooth, I got the sense that she was far older than she looked. I think her age is the secret she's keeping, not her fairy blood. But anyway, she told me about you, and said it was important that I trust you with my secret. She insisted I come tonight to tell it."

Aylan studied Gala. The description she'd given of the mysterious fairy matched her godmother perfectly. The dark hair, the ageless face — it couldn't be coincidence. Aylan was sure her godmother had been the fairy Gala had met. But why would her godmother insist that Gala come tonight, when surely she'd also known that tonight was the night the first of the stories would appear?

Somehow, Aylan knew the answer. Her godmother had wanted Gala to share her secret so that Aylan could do the same. What were the words Gala had used? *It'd be nice to have a friend I can be myself around.* Aylan took a deep breath. "Well, since we're sharing secrets about our mothers, I suppose I should tell you mine as well. That is, unless you've already heard..."

Chapter Nine

Aylan's first day at The Royal School began with a very rare occurrence indeed: when the sun rose that morning, Aylan was awake to see it. She was exhausted, having stayed up into the small hours talking to Gala, but far too anxious to stay in bed any longer. She watched until the sun had nearly cleared the horizon, and then pulled the tasseled cord near her bed to summon her maid. That task completed, Aylan made her way into the bathroom and seated herself upon the upholstered bench before the mirror.

As she waited, she thought back to the night before, and sent a silent 'thank you' to her godmother for sending Gala. She'd been surprised — and relieved — to find that Gala knew nothing about her mother's questionable lineage. Perhaps it wasn't as big a deal as she feared, or maybe it wasn't the sort of thing royal parents found necessary to discuss with their children. Either way,

when she'd mentioned it to Gala, leaving out the part about her father's previous engagement, her new friend didn't seem particularly scandalized.

"But that could be because her own mother is hiding secrets too," Aylan murmured, feeling a new surge of anxiety.

She sighed deeply at her reflection, letting the melancholy hold her for a moment, and then, annoyed at her own self-pitying, she straightened her back and leveled her chin. "Enough," she snapped at the mirror.

"Well I see you've already been taught the importance of proper posture, at least!" said a plump maid, startling Aylan by flinging open the door and bustling unceremoniously into the bathroom. "It's about time you woke up, I've been waiting on you for two hours now!"

"Two *hours*? Are you joking?" asked Aylan. "Surely none of the other girls have been awake that long!"

The maid laughed. "My dear it's your first day! You should have tried on six different gowns by now, and had your hair styled in three different ways. I've brought my design book though, so you can show me a rough idea of how you like your hair, and we can tweak it a bit if we need to. That'll save us some time. I'm Emmie by the way."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Aylan."

"Well of course I know who *you* are, princess," Emmie said with a laugh. "Why, I was born in the village just below the school, same as your mum! Of course I know my own country's princess."

"My mom was born here?"

"Well, that's what they say. I doubt its true though, seeing as every village between here and the capital says the same. They all want their own claim to fame, right? And it gives the girls down

there hope. After all, you never know if that brother of yours might follow in his dad's footsteps, eh? Now, what shall we do about your hair?"

"I guess whatever you think would look best. You're the expert."

"Now then, don't go puffing up my ego first thing in the morning," said Emmie with a grin. "But I do have an idea of something that will look lovely on you." She set to work, brushing and sectioning and pining Aylan's hair into a beautifully stiff and princess-appropriate style. Aylan could already feel the beginning of an all-day headache forming, but she kept quiet and watched the golden mound of curls on her head grow higher. After a while, when Emmie was nearly finished, Aylan finally got up the nerve to ask the question she'd been turning over in her mind throughout the painful ordeal:

"So Emmie? Do people admire my mother, then? I mean, if every village wants to claim her for its own, they must admire her… right?"

"Why of course they do! Well, except for the ones who still think she drugged your dad. But the king and queen have been a happy pair for so long, there aren't many left with that rumor still on their tongues."

"Wait, *what*?"

"Oh dear, have I said too much? Begging your pardon, princess; I didn't mean to bring up anything upsetting."

"People think my mom *drugged* my dad?"

"No, of course they don't," said Emmie soothingly. "Not anymore. But you must understand, at the time - well their marriage did happen quite abruptly. And the fact of your father's prior engagement was a rather open secret. People were just

surprised, is all. But goodness, you should have seen the old hags selling love potions pop up on every street corner the day after we heard the news! Not a man in the village would take a sip of anything handed to him by a woman for the better part of a month. It was a nice switch, sitting back and watching them get their own drinks, let me tell you. But most of the people were happy once they got used to the idea. And what's not to like? Our queen is one of us!"

Aylan felt weak. "How many people, would you say, still believe that rumor?"

"Now, don't go getting yourself upset over trifles. Let's hurry and choose your gown. I still have Princess Gala to style too, and we're short on time as it is."

"How many, Emmie?"

"About the drugging? I'm sure its not more than one in ten. Maybe one in twenty by now, who knows."

Aylan closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. "One in ten, in my own country? What about everywhere else?"

"I'm sorry, my dear, but I wouldn't have an answer for that. Sure, it may have been a bit of a scandal, but I do believe the other king — the one whose granddaughter was slighted by your father — tried to keep things quiet. And your own grandfather surely played along to help smooth it over. Why, half the princesses here might not know anything about your mum at all."

"And the other half probably think she spiked my dad's punch!"

"It won't do to go worrying about what anyone else thinks. Leave it be. You're the *king's* daughter too, now pick your chin up and act like it."

Aylan smiled despite the wave of panic she was feeling. "You sounded like my governess, Henry, just then," she said. "She'd tell me to do the same."

"Well Henry must be a woman of very good sense. Now, your hair looks lovely, but what do you think about adding a tiara since it's your first day? Then you'll look every *bit* the princess you are."

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"My head hurts," said Gala.

"Me too," agreed Aylan. "I had no idea hair could be pulled so tightly."

"My coiffureier at home is definitely much gentler with the pins."

"What in the world is a 'coiffureier'?"

"The person who styles my hair everyday. Do you have a different word for that here?"

"I have no idea. But whatever we call that person here, I don't have one. I just wear my hair down."

"That sounds amazing."

"Yep, that's what happens when your mom's a peasant. It's the one and only perk. Although the downside is that here I have to look princess-y, and my scalp has definitely not been properly conditioned for this. Seriously, is my head bleeding? I think my head might be bleeding."

Gala laughed. "From my vantage point up here — three full inches off the ground — I am happy to report that I see no visible lacerations."

"That's too bad. A head wound would definitely have gotten me out of classes today."

"Oh Aylan, stop. It's going to be fine. I knew nothing at all about your mom, and it's likely none of the others do either. And if they do, why would they care when it was more than twenty years ago? Stop worrying so much."

"You're right, I know. I'm trying."

"Good. Because we've got bigger things to worry about. Like where we're going to sit."

The girls had just arrived at the dining hall, where breakfast was being served to a throng of princesses, clustered at intervals down the sides of the longest table Aylan had ever seen. Though the room was filled with a rainbow of gowns and faces, Aylan's eyes somehow managed to fall immediately on the one countenance she had hoped not to see: Olivia's.

"Aylan, over here!" called the other princess, waving cheerfully.

Aylan raised her hand in greeting, and, not knowing how to avoid it, began to walk in Olivia's direction.

"Who's that?" whispered Gala. "She might be the most beautiful person I've ever seen in real life."

"Her name is Olivia," answered Aylan. "I met her yesterday. Her mother knows my dad."

"So she knows about your mom?"

"Oh, I'd definitely wager money that she knows all about my mom."

Gala looked at Aylan curiously. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Later."

"There you are!" scolded Olivia. "I was beginning to think you weren't going to show!"

"Um, I'm sorry," stammered Aylan, "I didn't realize you were waiting on me."

"Well of course! Remember yesterday? We made a date to have breakfast together. I'm Olivia, by the way, of the Southern Country," she added, inclining her head in Gala's direction.

"I'm Gala, of Andala. Pleased to meet you."

The girls sat across from Olivia, and Aylan had to suppress a giggle as Gala squirmed and fussed over her dress, trying to drape it just right in order to hide the fact that she wasn't actually sitting *on* her chair, but over it.

"Are you alright, Gala?" asked Olivia after a moment. "Did your seamstress accidentally leave a pin in your bodice or something?"

"Oh, er, no, nothing like that," said Gala, blushing. "I, uh — I took a spill off my horse the other day. Still a bit sore, that's all. It's hard to get comfortable."

Without meaning to, Aylan pictured Gala trying to ride horseback — or more likely, being dragged through the air like some sort of elaborate kite as she clutched the reins of a galloping horse. The mental image was so clear and abrupt that Aylan couldn't help the laughter that bubbled up her throat. Unfortunately, it coincided with the sip of orange juice she was just then swallowing, resulting in a spectacular episode of choking and coughing. Aylan felt the heat rising in her cheeks as Gala pounded her back, quite a bit harder than was strictly necessary, and all the other eyes in the room turned to see what was the matter.

"I'm fine. Don't worry, I'm fine," Aylan croaked between coughs. She wanted to crawl under the table and disappear. Finally,

after several minutes, she was able to take a deep, stuttering breath without setting off another tirade of coughing.

"All better?" chirped Gala.

"Yes, thank you. But for goodness sake, you didn't have to hit my back quite so hard!"

"Well, that'll teach you to laugh at your friend for falling off her horse, eh?"

"Yes well now *one* of us actually does have a sore backside," grumbled Aylan. "Geez, you need to cool it with the weight lifting. You hit harder than my brother."

Aylan turned to Olivia, only to find that the other princess's cheeks were nearly as red as her own felt, and her face looked as though she'd tasted something sour. "Er, sorry about that," said Aylan, unsure why she was apologizing. "Just some juice down the wrong pipe."

"Oh. Oh, it's fine," said Olivia, shaking her head and relaxing her face. "Speaking of pipes though, have you two begun thinking about your gowns for the Winter Ball?"

Aylan stared at Olivia dumbly, trying to make sense of what she'd just heard.

"I'm sorry, what does the ball have to do with pipes?" asked Gala.

"Well nothing, obviously, but who cares about pipes anyway?"

"Umm…"

"Exactly. I'm having my seamstress send over some fabric samples for my gown as soon as possible. She's thinking red satin, but I think red at the holidays is *so* cliché, don't you?

Aylan nodded obediently, while Gala still looked confused.

"I'm hoping my brother Garrick will stay in town long enough to attend. He traveled here with me, and now he's staying with a family friend down in the village for a few weeks before he makes the journey home again. He swears every time I ask him that he wouldn't be caught dead at the ball, but I still think I might be able to convince him. What about you Aylan? You just mentioned a brother – do you think he'll come?"

"Liam?" said Aylan with a snort. "He's not exactly the dancing sort. Honestly, if Liam had the choice between going to a ball and sawing off his right arm… well, he'd go to the ball. But it would be a difficult choice for him. He'd really sit and ponder what life with one arm would be like, for at least a few minutes."

"Well that's too bad," said Olivia. "I'd love to meet him."

"Oh, um, of course" answered Aylan, surprised by Olivia's enthusiasm. "I'm sure I'll be going home for a few visits while we're here; maybe you can come along sometime."

"How nice, I'd love to! Thank you for the invitation."

Olivia smiled sweetly and continued her chatter, and Aylan felt herself finally beginning to relax. She'd expected coolness, at least, from the other princess, and more likely outward hostility. But if Olivia could be friendly — the one person in the school with more right than any other to dislike her — then surely the other girls would be too. Maybe her unusual lineage really was no big deal.

After several minutes, Olivia excused herself with a mention of forgotten dance slippers, and a promise to walk Aylan and Gala to breakfast the next morning. The girls waved her off, but as soon as she was out of earshot, the smile left Gala's face.

"Ok, Aylan, what's the thing you're not telling me?"

"Huh?"

"About you and Olivia. You left something out when you told me about your mom last night, didn't you?"

Aylan felt all the relief of the last half-hour wash away at the urgency in Gala's voice. "Why?" she stammered, "did you sense something?"

"Tell me first, then I'll tell you."

"Ok, well… my father was already engaged the night he met my mom. It was a secret, but not really. Enough people knew that rumors were started that my mom either drugged my dad, or slipped him a love potion. Emmie told me that part this morning. That was how they explained his throwing off his fiancé so abruptly for… for a nobody."

"And what does that have to do with Olivia?"

"It was her mother. My father was engaged to her mother. And I'm sure she knows. She has to, doesn't she? But she was so sweet just now…

"I think I know why."

"Gala, you're killing me here. What did you sense?"

"Ok, you're going to think this is crazy. *I* think it's crazy. But it was a pretty clear vision, and I have them so rarely, so this has to be an important secret… something she's been carrying a long time, something she thinks about every day…"

"Gala, for goodness sake, spit it out!"

"Ok. I think Olivia is being sweet to you… because she wants to marry your brother."

"Wait, what?"

"I told you, it sounds crazy."

"But she's never even met my brother! And honestly, I don't know her very well, but I know they'd be terrible together. Are you sure that's what you saw?"

Gala shrugged. "A secret by itself has to be pretty intense for me to sense it. Usually, with the fairies, they're using some kind of physical artifice to conceal themselves — like my dresses with extra long hems — and that's why I pick up on them more easily. It's not an exact science or anything, but yes, I'm pretty sure."

Aylan sat back, trying to absorb this new information. She'd only known Gala less than a day, so she had no frame of reference to know if her new friend's talent was really as accurate as she claimed. The whole thing seemed completely absurd. And yet… if it meant Olivia was going to play nice, did it really matter what her reasons were? Olivia was the only one who had a legitimate right to dislike her, so any of the other princesses who knew the story would likely be guided by Olivia's behavior. It was definitely better to have her as an ally, surely.

"What are you thinking?" asked Gala.

"Oh, just that I seriously doubt my brother would want to marry Olivia. Like, ever. But if the idea of it keeps her friendly, I see no reason she needs to know that."

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Gala glided silently beside her new friend on their way to class. Aylan seemed lost in her own thoughts, so there was nothing to distract Gala from what was then tugging at her mind: the fact that she hadn't been honest with Aylan. Or at least, not fully so. It was true that she'd sensed Olivia's plan to one day marry Aylan's brother, but there had been a second part to the vision, one that didn't make sense. For as forcefully as she'd felt Olivia's ambitions toward Liam, she'd equally felt Olivia's loathing toward Aylan…

and those two things didn't seem to go together. *Why would she want to marry into a family she despises?*

Until she had an answer to that question, Gala decided to take Aylan's own approach: "I see no reason she needs to know that," she thought. "At least not yet."

Chapter Ten

The first few weeks of Aylan's time at school passed in a blur, and Gala's strange prediction was soon mostly forgotten, tucked away behind a million other thoughts and things to remember. Every morning, just as she'd promised, Olivia turned up at Aylan's door and walked with the girls to breakfast. She was charming and civil, but it was clear from the start the trio had very little in common and few things to talk about. Even so, Olivia seemed intent on maintaining the friendship, and Aylan was grateful — for Olivia was the shining star of their class. It turned out the brother she'd mentioned was actually her twin, and aside from being heir to a beautiful country by the sea, he was also said to be outrageously handsome. Such inducement was enough that all the other girls sought to stay in Olivia's good graces.

"I don't really see what the big deal is," Aylan had grumbled to Gala. "Honestly, have you ever heard of a prince

who *wasn't* described as handsome? He could have a horse-face for all we know."

"Aylan, he's Olivia's *twin*," Gala had answered, her brow raised. "Whatever her other faults, Olivia might possibly be the most beautiful person walking this earth. I'd be surprised if her *twin* wasn't just the tiniest bit attractive."

"I guess so," Aylan said noncommittally.

She was loathe to admit the real reason Olivia's brother irked her, and she hoped that Gala couldn't sense it: for if having a brother like Olivia's was really such valuable currency at The Royal School, then Aylan should have been surrounded by just as many friends as Olivia. *More so,* even, for the kingdom Liam would inherit was by far the more powerful of the two. And yet, she was not. The other girls interacted with her in a very stiff, formal sort of way — when they interacted with her at all. Aylan suspected several would outright ignore her if it weren't for Olivia, who, aside from their daily breakfasts, was only lukewarm herself. Only Gala was truly friendly.

Oddly, etiquette, the one class Aylan was sure she'd hate more than all the others, turned out to be the high point of her daily schedule. Lady Dalrymple was noticeably harder on her than the others, often grilling her on obscure rules of dress and decorum, and criticizing harshly when she stumbled, but the occasions for critique were few. Henriette had taught Aylan well, whereas several of the other girls' governesses had been lax, and so at least in that one class, there was no one who could out-princess Aylan Charming. She reveled in that small daily victory.

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"There now, how's *that* for a hairstyle?" asked Emmie smugly as she stepped back with a flourish and allowed Aylan a view of the mirror.

"Well, Emmie, it feels like my entire scalp is separating from my skull, so we know it's in good and tight at least."

"Oh nonsense! You look lovely. Now I've pulled your deep-blue silk morning-gown — the one with the wide neckline — and sent it to be pressed. The cut suits you beautifully, but I think the color is just the tiniest bit formal for daywear, so we'll skip the tiara today and just add a few sapphire studs to the back of your hair. Keep it simple, ok?"

"Whatever you say, Emmie," answered Aylan.

Her maid bustled off to retrieve the dress, leaving Aylan to stare at her reflection. She'd had a constant headache for weeks, and still she submitted to the daily torture of having her hair elaborately pulled back and pinned up and studded with jewels. "Not that it's doing me the least bit of good here," she thought. "I might as well wear sackcloth and ashes like everyone expects of me. It'd probably be more comfortable. Unless…"

"Emmie!" Aylan called. "Forget the hair-studs! There's a necklace I'd like to wear today instead."

She jumped up from the bench and ran back into her room to retrieve her great-grandmother's sapphire necklace from its hiding place in her enchanted shoebox. Just as before, the stones felt warm to the touch, and sparkled dramatically in the sunlight. With a bit of fumbling, she got it fastened around her neck, and then returned to the mirror to see the effect.

She was stunning.

With her hair pushed off her face and gathered at her nape, there was nothing to distract from the swirls of diamond-

studded silver and sapphires that draped over nearly the full width of her clavicles. "Definitely the tiniest bit formal for daywear," she said, repeating Emmie's words with a wide grin.

At that moment, Gala glided into the bathroom. "What is *that*?" she gasped. "Is there a ball or a coronation or something this morning that someone forgot to tell me about?"

"No," answered Aylan with a giggle, "it's my grandmother Rapunzel's. I just felt like wearing it today."

"Well, it's definitely a statement piece if that's what you're going for."

"Yes, I think that's what I'm going for."

"Alright, my dear," said Emmie, bustling back in with the blue dress on her arm. "Here's your dress, freshly – what is *that*?"

Aylan rolled her eyes. "It's a necklace."

"Well obviously it's a necklace. But you aren't seriously planning to wear it today are you?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Well that necklace is of a caliber that most princesses would consider wearing on their wedding day as their 'something blue.' You're considering wearing it on a Tuesday at eight-thirty in the morning. To an etiquette class."

"Oh, I'm not *considering* it Emmie. I'm actually wearing it. Now why don't you get to work on Gala's hair; I can get myself in my dress. We don't want to be late down to breakfast after all."

Aylan grinned at Emmie's disapproving glare as she retrieved her dress from the maid's arm and turned back into her room. She shut the door behind her and stepped out of her her nightdress, still smiling. A small bit of rebellion was exactly what she needed to brighten her mood. *What do I care about what some*

snotty princesses think of me? My dad is the king of this country – this country, *ladies!* – *and today I feel like wearing some of the crown jewels.*

Abruptly, she straightened; there was something else she felt like wearing, too. The compulsion had hit her from nowhere, with an intensity she found practically irresistible, and oddly, seemed to coincide with an increase in heat from the blue stones draped over her décolletage. For the second time that morning, she retrieved her enchanted shoebox, and this time pulled from its depths the slingshot Liam had carved for her. It was the first time she'd held it since the day she arrived at school, and she had to admit, as she turned it in her hands and felt its balance, that it was a fine bit of carving. Her thumb grazed over the miniature 'L.C.' where her brother had signed his work, and she felt a sharp pang of homesickness. *Who'd have ever thought I'd miss my brother so much?*

The muffled sounds of protest from behind the bathroom door told her that Emmie was in the 'stabbing-Gala's-skull-repeatedly-with-hairpins' phase of the styling process, so she didn't have much time. Quickly she composed herself, strapped the slingshot to her calf with a pink hair ribbon, and stepped into her blue dress. The knock at her door came just as she finished the lacings that ran down either side of her rib cage and ended in two pert blue bows at her hips. "Olivia, right on time, as always," she muttered. With a quick glance in the mirror and a smoothing hand over her skirt, Aylan plastered a smile on her face and opened her door.

"Good lord," exclaimed the other princess as soon as she saw Aylan's ensemble. "What in the world is *that?*"

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By the time she got to etiquette class, Aylan was feeling rather pleased with her decision to wear the necklace. As expected, it had attracted no small amount of attention at breakfast. Every time she looked up, she caught one princess or another staring at it, or whispering to a companion while casting furtive glances. And every time, Aylan waved and smiled and lifted her chin to offer a better view. Some of the princesses waved uncertainly back, while others simply looked away, embarrassed.

Olivia had finished her breakfast and excused herself at record speed.

Now, sitting in class, Aylan found she was getting only marginally less attention than she had at breakfast, which meant she was getting substantially *more* attention than Lady Dalrymple standing at the head of the class. To be fair, Aylan was wearing the outrageously ornate, jeweled necklace featured in the portrait of one of The Royal School's most legendary students, and Lady Dalrymple was discussing dinner plates. It wasn't much of a contest.

"You know Aylan, there's a reason I like to sit at the back of the class," grumbled Gala under her breath. "It's because that's normally where you get the least amount of attention."

"Sorry," whispered Aylan as she watched Gala fluff out her dress yet again. More scrutiny in their direction meant Gala was even more paranoid than normal about someone noticing the gap that existed between her body and the seat of her chair. "Don't worry, your dress is draped perfectly. No one can see a thing."

"I guess you're not completely to blame," answered Gala. "Lord knows, that necklace is probably the only thing keeping

most of the class awake. How long do you think Lady Dalrymple can possibly drone on about place settings? I literally cannot think of a more boring subject."

"Ladies, is there something you'd like to add to the lecture?" barked Lady Dalrymple, causing the entire class to once again turn to stare at Aylan and Gala.

"No, no, nothing to add," said Aylan smoothly. "We were just commenting on how lovely that plate is. Classic shape, elegant color, not flashy but of obvious quality — a perfect staple piece for a luncheon with local dignitaries."

"So it is," said Lady Dalrymple coldly. "As you're so well versed on situationally-appropriate tableware, this class must be very boring for you. However, I do hope you pay more attention when we get around to our discussion on appropriate jewelry choices later in the year. You've much to learn on *that* front."

The entire class collectively inhaled and then fell deathly silent. Aylan held her chin high and returned Lady Dalrymple's cold stare, but she knew her cheeks were burning red.

"Now then, let's continue. Eyes forward, everyone!"

Lady Dalrymple resumed her lecture, while Aylan tried to keep from visibly trembling as rage washed over her.

"You ok?" whispered Gala.

"No."

"She's awful. But don't let her get to you."

"Give me your bracelet."

"What?"

"Your bracelet. Give it to me."

"Why?"

"Just do it," Aylan hissed.

Gala untied the silk ribbon at her wrist and handed it over. "Careful," she warned, the pearls are just strung on, they aren't secured."

"Perfect," answered Aylan. In one quick movement, she released all the pearls into her palm and shoved them into a pocket hidden in the seam of her dress.

"What are you doing?" asked Gala.

"Shhh. I'm teaching an etiquette lesson of my own."

Aylan waited until Lady Dalrymple's back was turned, and then reached down and retrieved the slingshot from beneath her skirt. Gala's eyes widened.

"Aylan, I don't know if this is such a good idea."

"It's not a good idea… it's a *great* idea."

"Do you actually know how to use that thing?"

"Shh!"

"Now girls, *this* is a fine example of what you might use to serve a grand duke at a non-State dinner, though it's a bit fancy for a lesser marquesse or an earl if no one of higher rank is present. You'll note the monogram of the Royal Seal in gold at the plate's center." Lady Dalrymple slowly turned in a half circle, holding the plate aloft for the class to see, and Aylan seized her opportunity. Using the glittering Seal as her target, she quickly took aim and fired off the first of the pearls. It was a perfect shot. The small bead whistled through the air, and struck the exact center of the plate with impressive force. The loud 'ping' produced by the impact caused Lady Dalrymple to jump backward in alarm, and the plate slipped from her hand and shattered to bits on the floor. By the time the headmistress's confusion had subsided and she was able to look up from the

wreckage at her feet, the slingshot was once again well-concealed in the folds of Aylan's gown.

"Er, excuse me, girls; my hand must have slipped. My apologies. I'll just summon someone to come clean this up and then we'll proceed."

A low groan rose from all corners of the room, which Lady Dalrymple ignored. She tugged sharply at a tasseled rope hanging in the corner of the room, and a maid appeared a moment later, broom in hand. The girls pouted as they watched her make quick work of the debris.

"Maybe next time aim for Lady Dalrymple's forehead, and we can make our escape while she's unconscious," said Gala.

"I'd need heavier ammo for that."

"Aylan, that was a joke. You can't actually shoot the headmistress."

"No, actually I *can*, I just probably shouldn't. That's ok, plenty of other targets up there."

"Girls, your attention, please," said Lady Dalrymple, tapping with a silver spoon against the bowl of a crystal wine glass. "Let's continue. Proper dishes are an essential part of setting the tone of your event, but other details can be just as imperative, if not more so. For example, your staff will need to be aware of the wine preferences of your important guests. There are many more options than simply white or red, and each type requires a specific glass. This, for example, is meant for a bordeaux."

Lady Dalrymple held the glass aloft and again began her slow half-turn, presenting it to the class. This time she made it nearly three-quarters of the way before another of Aylan's pearls sliced the delicate stem of the glass in two, sending its bowl crashing to the floor.

"What the *devil* is going on here?" shrieked the headmistress, whirling around on the class and brandishing the now rather sharp and somewhat threatening-looking remains of the wine glass.

"She looks like she's about to get into the classiest bar fight *ever*," said Gala with a soft giggle.

Just then, a girl two seats down from Aylan raised her hand. Aylan felt a sinking in the pit of her stomach; apparently Gala wasn't the only one paying attention to her small rebellion.

"Yes, Marisol?" said the headmistress.

"Lady Dalrymple, forgive me, but I'm a bit concerned about the quality of the stemware at this school. Are wine glasses supposed to just break like that?"

"I agree," added the girl sitting to Marisol's left, before Lady Dalrymple could respond. "I mean, you tapped that glass maybe three times with the spoon, and that was enough to crack it? I'm not sure we can learn properly with this cheap stuff. Can't the school afford any better?"

"Maybe that spoon isn't actually real silver, maybe it's lead," said a third princess. "Could that be why it broke the glass?"

"I've heard lead is poisonous. Lady Dalrymple, is all the school's flatware made of lead? I can't imagine my parents would be too happy about me being poisoned."

"Mine would be *horrified.*"

"Mine, too!"

"Lady Dalrymple, why can't the school afford real silver and proper crystal?"

"Is it even safe to eat here?"

The murmur of questions from around the room built quickly and soon became an overwhelming buzz of unintelligible voices. Lady Dalrymple's lips pressed together in a thin white line. "Class is dismissed early today," she hissed. "Everybody, *out*. Now."

Something that sounded suspiciously like a cheer went up in the room as a horde of princesses stampeded to the exit before their unexpected freedom could be rescinded.

Out in the corridor, the crowd of girls dispersed quickly as they headed in different directions in groups of twos and threes.

"You *have* to teach me how to use that thing," said Gala. "That was seriously amazing."

"We have the rest of the afternoon free; let's go down to the beach and I'll give you a lesson."

The pair turned toward the double doors at the far end of the gallery, but were stopped short by a trio of voices.

"Hey Aylan, wait up!"

"Lily, don't! You can't talk to her!"

"Oh nonsense, this is getting absurd. Aylan!"

"Lily, no!"

Aylan turned around to find Marisol, the princess who'd first raised her hand to question the quality of the school's stemware, and King Edward's daughter, Rafaela, who'd barely made eye contact with her since they'd met at the welcome breakfast. Both were in pursuit of a third princess — presumably Lily — who was charging up the hall toward Aylan despite their insistent tugs at her sleeves.

"Lily, stop. You can't!"

Aylan suddenly felt an intense surge of indignation. "Why, Rafaela?" she asked. "Why can't she talk to me? Do you think everyone ought to be as snobbish and shallow as you are?"

The smaller girl came to an abrupt halt. "What? Why would you say that?"

"Why would I say that? Really?"

"Yes, really. What did I ever do to make you not like me? I was so sure you and I were going to be friends."

"Friends? You were certainly *friendly* while your dad was still here, but you've been avoiding me ever since. Do you think I don't know why?"

"Actually," said Lily, "I'm starting to wonder if you *do* know why."

"It's because of my mom! Because my mom was a peasant and she had the gall to marry a prince. And probably half the girls here are horrified by the idea, and the other half are horrified but also secretly want to know what kind of love potion she used to snare him. Well you know what? I don't care about any of you. You're all shallow, and my mom could out-class you any day of the week. Let's go, Gala."

Aylan turned once again, intending to storm elegantly out of the castle without a single backward glance, but an unexpected sound stopped her in her tracks: laughter.

"Wait. Wait! Aylan, come back!" choked Lily between giggles. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to laugh, but are you *serious*?"

"Aylan," added Marisol, with a disapproving glance at Lily, "no one cares about your mom. How could you even think that?"

"Well to be fair," said Lily, "*some* people do. But we don't."

"You don't?"

"Of course we don't!" said Rafaela. "Your dad and mine are best friends; I've been looking forward to meeting you for years!"

"Well then why has everyone been avoiding me?"

"Because of the 'Supplemental Etiquette Manual,' of course!" said Marisol.

"To be honest, we thought you were avoiding us," added Lily.

"Wait, what? What's a 'Supplemental Etiquette Manual?'"

"It's a little booklet that lists some of the rules of decorum specific to this country. We each had one in our room when we arrived."

"I didn't get one," said Gala.

"Huh," said Marisol. "I'm certain everyone else did."

"But what does that have to do with me?" asked Aylan.

"It said that there are strict rules about addressing members of the royal family here. Only a member of the Charming family — that's you — is allowed to initiate any sort of acquaintance. And until you choose to do so, it's considered the height of bad manners to speak to you, or even make eye contact."

"Honestly, Aylan, you're basically the queen of etiquette class. How did you not know that?" asked Lily.

"Because it's nonsense!" cried Aylan. "There's no way that's a real rule!"

"Really? How strange," said Marisol. "I wonder why they'd tell us it was?"

"You really thought we were avoiding you because of your mom?" asked Lily, shaking her head. "No wonder you thought we were all snobby. No offense, but your mom is such old news. Its

your *grandma* I want to know about. She's basically my idol. Once I saw you wearing her necklace in class, I just had to talk to you. Rules be damned, right?"

"Fake rules."

"Right, fake rules be damned. So seriously, about that necklace. Is it really hers? From the portrait?"

"It really is. My dad gave it to me the day we arrived here. I didn't even know about Rapunzel until then."

"Really?" asked Rafaela. "I can't believe your parents wouldn't have told you about her sooner. She's a legend at this school."

"Oh, I think there are probably lots of things my parents neglected to tell me before I came here."

"Well even without the necklace, you're clearly her granddaughter," said Lily. "That stunt you pulled in there with the slingshot was probably the gutsiest thing anyone has done here *since* Rapunzel was a student. You might end up a legend yourself."

"Wait…you saw that?"

"Of course we did. Why do you think we jumped in to help?" asked Marisol. "Your aim is fantastic, but your subtlety… well you might want to work on that."

"Because you suck at it," added Lily.

"Oh, umm, yeah. I guess I will," stuttered Aylan.

"Let's go work on it now!" said Gala. "Girls, Aylan was about to give me a lesson on her slingshot; do you want to come down to the beach and join us?"

"Yes!" cried Rafaela. "I've always wanted to learn, but none of my brothers would ever teach me."

"Should I sneak back into the classroom and pinch a few more wine glasses to shoot at?" asked Lily with a giggle.

"No, just go in and grab the chalk from the board," said Gala. "We can draw portraits of Lady Dalrymple for our targets.

And just like that, Aylan and Gala's group of two became a laughing, cheerful group of five.

Chapter Eleven

The next morning, a large group of princesses gathered on the front drive, waiting for the carriages that would take them on their first trip for charitable acts class. The ever-cheerful Lady Goode seemed to be running late as always, and so as the the girls wandered out of the castle, they divided into clusters and pairs to chat and enjoy the fresh air while they waited for their instructor. Olivia was among the last to step outside, and when she finally did she froze on the spot. Aylan was not standing alone with Gala as she should have been, but was instead part of a circle of five — and the three new princesses she was chatting and laughing with so easily weren't just any princesses, but some of the most sought after girls in the entire school.

"Oh no," whispered Olivia. "No, no, no."

She took a deep breath and mentally reviewed everything she knew about Aylan's companions:

Rafaela, with her raven-hair, was in an upper-level Embroidery class with Olivia and seemed like the quiet sort. She was also a good deal smaller than the other girls. "Like her country," thought Olivia uncharitably. Even so, she was certainly worth having as a friend. Her country might be tiny, but it sat nicely atop most of the diamond and gemstone mines in the world. She also had six older brothers — though that was irrelevant, of course, since Olivia had her mind set on marrying Liam.

Lily, whose fiery red hair and porcelain skin both seemed almost blindingly bright in the sunlight, was even more unique. The rumor was that after Lily's birth, doctors had advised her parents that a second pregnancy might be fatal to her mother. While some kings would find the impossibility of a proper heir grounds to overturn a marriage, Lily's father had simply made a royal decree that in the absence of a male heir, his daughter would inherit the throne. In all the world, such a thing had never happened before; someday, Lily would be the very first woman to rule as queen in her own right. An enviable ally, to be sure.

Marisol was the most surprising of the newcomers. She was a daughter of one of the 'Original Three' families – descendants of the three kings of legend who'd once divided the entirety of the world between them. Though the lands and power of the Original Three had eroded greatly over the millennia, theirs were still names that commanded a great deal of respect, and the illustriousness of her family meant Marisol had nearly as many girls attempting to curry favor with her, and by extension her younger brother, as Olivia had. It also meant that of all the girls in school, she ought to have had the highest reverence for tradition and propriety – and yet here she was, chatting away with Aylan Charming. *Aylan Charming*!

Olivia tamped down her growing feeling of panic and plastered what she hoped was a believable smile on her face. Her plan of becoming Aylan's one and only friend had been in a precarious spot ever since Aylan and Gala had paired off so quickly; now it seemed beyond all hope. For the thousandth time she silently cursed Lady Dalrymple for refusing to put a copy of the phony 'Supplemental Etiquette Manual' in Gala's room. "Too risky," she'd argued, and no amount of Olivia's gold had been enough to change her mind.

"Good morning, girls," said Olivia brightly as she slid into the circle next to Aylan. "Everyone ready for our adventure today?" The others shifted to include her, and the easy chatter resumed with Olivia as their sixth.

Not long after, Lady Goode appeared at last.

"Well ladies, it's good to see all of you looking so cheerful!" she said, as she bustled out of the castle. "We discussed in our last class what you should expect once we go out into the village, and today you'll put what you've learned to good use. We'll be delivering food and supplies to the orphanage, and preparing lunch for the children. Afterward, you'll be able to spend a bit of time with them, reading, or playing in the yard. So if everyone is ready, let's get going!"

The girls all began piling into the waiting open-air chaises that would transport them into town, and it became immediately plain that Aylan's group had no intention of splitting up. Olivia hesitated before climbing up to join them; she hated to be crowded and she was quite certain the brim of her stylish sunhat would be crushed if she tried to squeeze into a ride that was clearly only meant to seat four.

"Come on, Olivia, we can make room for you," said Aylan.

"Actually, I think I'll ride over there," she answered, gesturing toward a chaise at the the front of the line where three ivory skinned princesses, all in beautifully adorned hats, sat rigidly straight.

"Are you sure?"

"Completely sure. I'll see you when we get to town." She turned and hurried off, hoping relief wasn't too plain on her face. Her plan had been to get close to Aylan, but there was 'close' and then there was *too close.* Besides, if things continued as they were going, she was going to have to think up a new plan…and quickly.

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The carriage ride was a pleasant one. Though the chaises were uncovered, the day was warm enough not to need a wrap, and the sky was a brilliant uninterrupted blue. Aylan could feel the sun already warming and tanning her cheeks, yet she couldn't find it in her heart to regret leaving her hat behind. Emmie didn't seem likely to scold her for the transgression… mainly because Emmie would probably spend the foreseeable future continuing to scold her for refusing to have her hair put up that morning. Aylan didn't care; proper or not, the day was simply too beautiful to be ruined by the ache of pins jammed against her scalp.

"You know Aylan, you really have the loveliest hair," said Rafaela. "I never noticed it before since you always wear it up."

"We *all* always wear our hair up," said Marisol, bemused. "We're princesses. That's what we do."

"But don't you think that's kind of stupid?" asked Lily. "I mean, when you think about it? With these big piles of hair on our heads, bows and pearls and goodness knows what else stuck in

them everywhere, we walk around all day looking like overly-frosted birthday cakes."

"Take your hair down then," said Aylan with a grin. "Unless you're scared."

"Scared? Ridiculous. Why would I be scared?"

"Umm, because Rosamund spent an hour on that hairstyle for you this morning, and she'll literally kill you," said Marisol.

"Oh honestly, Marisol, you really shouldn't let that maid bully you so."

"I think you're both scared," said Gala.

"Oh yeah? Well why don't you take your hair down first, then?"

Gala shrugged her shoulders and grinned. "Gladly," she said, reaching into her pile of brunette swirls, and pulling out a pin with dramatic flourish. She held it aloft for the group to see, and then chucked it with a giggle at Lily's head before making quick work of the rest, dropping them unceremoniously to the ground one by one. "That *does* feel lovely," she sighed when the last of her hair fell free and she shook it out with her fingers. "How do I look?"

"Like a family of birds recently vacated your head to fly south for the winter," answered Lily. "It might have been wiser to wait until there was an available hairbrush."

Gala laughed. "Totally worth it. Your turn!"

Lily smiled and pulled a pin from her strawberry hair. "To Rosamund!" she said.

Rafaela and Marisol giggled, and then followed suit. "To Rosamund!"

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Garrick leaned against the stone façade of the Earl of Marisette's summer home, and stared at the street. He had an idea that his sister would be passing by at some point during the morning, or maybe it was tomorrow, he wasn't quite sure. Lately, he'd been tuning Olivia out more and more when they spoke; her school gossip bored him, and he'd heard her theories on the *other* matter so often he could recite them backwards. Unfortunately, everything else about the village bored him as well, and that left watching for his sister's carriage brigade to drive by as the most interesting part of his day. "I have got to get out of here," he thought. "Promise be damned."

At that moment, the silence of the street was broken by the sound of approaching hooves; the chance of it being the parade of princesses was about the same as it being a parade of coal carts, but Garrick straightened his attire and ran a hand through his hair anyway. That small investment in his appearance paid dividends; a liveried horse pulling a gilded white chaise appeared from around the bend, followed by another, and then a third. Even from that distance Garrick could easily pick out his sister's shining auburn hair in the first carriage.

"Typical Livy," he thought. "Always front and center." He scanned the faces of the other girls who rode with her, while he still had the privacy of not having been detected. Each was lovely: backs all perfectly straight, hats angled just enough on perfectly curled heads to be considered 'jaunty,' wrists all perfectly crossed in their laps. Garrick yawned. "God it must be boring to be a princess," he muttered. "But I wonder why Liv isn't riding with Aylan? She can't possibly have given up on her plan already."

Oddly, as soon as Aylan came into his mind, Garrick found that her image was quite stuck there. He made a quick inventory of the other carriages, looking for her face, and was more disappointed than he cared to admit when all he found were four carriages full of princesses, and a fifth carrying what he assumed were their strangely disheveled lady-maids. "Maybe they decided to kick her out after all," he mused.

By then Olivia's carriage was close enough that she spotted him, and Garrick waved his hand in greeting. She returned the salute in kind, and Garrick caught her rolling her eyes and grinning indulgently as the bows he then offered to each of her companions prompted several to giggle behind their fans. Garrick was used to the reaction — the twins' striking appearances had been flustering people for years — but much as Olivia enjoyed her effect on others, Garrick mostly found it annoying. "I don't know why it'd be so horrible for a princess to smile without having to duck behind one of those stupid fans," he grumbled.

The fourth carriage passed by at last, and Garrick straightened and began to turn back toward the house. Just as he did, a streak of sunlight flashed off something gold at the edge of his vision, and without thinking he turned to see what it was.

His jaw dropped.

Before him was Aylan, her loose hair tumbling in waves over her shoulders. She was surrounded by other girls — presumably princesses as well, and not the servants Garrick had supposed — but though his manners forced him into a bow for each, his eyes continued to return to Aylan. She was clearly the same girl he'd seen from across the room that morning at the school, and yet, somehow, she was not. Though he hadn't admitted it to his sister, he'd found her remarkably beautiful when he'd first

laid eyes on her, and the gilt of sunshine made her even more so now; but the change he saw wasn't in her beauty. Before, she'd been a beautiful face blended in a sea of beautiful faces, but now she stood out amongst her peers in a way that was hard for him to define. "But that could be because *they* all look like they just came through a hurricane," he reasoned.

Though he continued to stare at her, she didn't duck behind her fan like the others had, or pretend not to notice his interest. Instead, she met his gaze, and held it. Color rose in her cheeks, but her blue eyes never left his, even as the forward progress of the carriage forced her to turn her head, and then her body, to face him. It was… intriguing. And unexpected. He knew Olivia was likely still watching him, and if she was, she was definitely furious because he was *definitely* making a scene, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

"Aylan," he whispered, testing the word on his tongue. She smiled, perhaps recognizing the shape of her name on his lips, and he found himself grinning back at her. "Oh yea, Livy's going to be so angry," he muttered. Even so, he couldn't seem to pry the smile from his face until after the curve of the road carried Aylan from his view.

Chapter Twelve

On the first day of October, Emmie bustled into the room unannounced at seven-thirty, as was her custom. Aylan still preferred Sundays, when she could sleep as long as she liked, but Emmie's unyielding cheerfulness and a penchant for knowing the best school gossip were slowly beginning to make Aylan more agreeable to having her sleep cut short, with one exception: Lately, though she tried her best to think of anything else before falling asleep, she often found her dreams filled with the probing expression in a pair of familiar green eyes — and they weren't Olivia's. She tried to jump out of bed as soon as Emmie turned the door handle on those particular mornings, but oh, how she wished to stay in bed a few moments longer, dreaming of those green eyes and the handsome face that came with them…

"Good morning, poppet!" Emmie called as she swept in, brandishing the familiar silver hairbrush. Aylan felt her scalp pucker in anticipation of the imminent assault.

"Emmie, you are literally more annoying than my dollhouse at home."

"Huh?"

"Never mind, too hard to explain. But why do you *always* insist on waking me up first? Shouldn't it be Gala's turn to be first one of these days?"

"Two reasons," answered Emmie. "First, her governess never sent me a letter filled with threats of bodily harm if I didn't get her down to breakfast on time…"

Aylan groaned. *Thanks a lot, Henry.*

"… And second, your suite-mate has a habit of always keeping her door locked at night."

"Of course she does," thought Aylan. "You'd probably have a stroke if you accidentally walked in on Gala slumbering peacefully several feet in the air above her bed."

"Now then," said Emmie, "I have a surprise for you. But you shall only have it if you let me pin your hair up properly this morning. Your wearing it down all the time lately is causing quite a scandal amongst the maids."

"Did you just bribe me?" asked Aylan, amused.

"I did," she answered, "and my terms are non-negotiable. Do you accept?"

"I accept," said Aylan sweetly.

"*And* you must promise to actually keep the pins *in* your hair for the *entire* day."

Aylan glared at Emmie. "I accept," she said again, this time with far less enthusiasm.

"That's my girl. Now, into the bathroom!"

Aylan climbed out of bed and plopped down on the bench in front of the mirror. "Alright, I am sitting here at your mercy," she said, "willing to let you make me look ridiculous. What's my surprise?"

Emmie got in a few good swipes with the brush to make sure Aylan wasn't bluffing, and then produced a crisp envelope from her apron pocket and dropped it into Aylan's lap. The nearly illegible writing was instantly recognizable: Liam had sent her a letter.

"No fair!" cried Aylan. "You can't bribe me with my own mail!"

"Oh go on and read your letter, princess, and don't mind me. By the time I'm done you'll wonder why you ever put up a fight with me over your hair in the first place."

"Fat chance," muttered Aylan, opening the letter. It was a single sheet of heavy card stock, the kind her mother kept in her writing desk for sending messages to important dignitaries. Liam's handwriting was even worse than it had been on the envelope — he must have been in a hurry writing it — so it took Aylan a moment to decipher the words. When she did though, all grumpiness over her coiffure was forgotten.

"Liam is coming to visit!" she exclaimed, turning in her seat to beam up at Emmie.

"Who's Liam?" asked the maid, firmly turning Aylan's head back toward the mirror.

"Liam is Aylan's brother," said Gala, yawning, as she finally made her appearance in the bathroom.

"Prince *William*, you mean?"

"No one ever calls him that, but yes," answered Aylan.

"He's the one who gave her that slingshot that caused such a fuss in etiquette class during our third week. Of course, you're not supposed to know that, Emmie, so don't go blabbing it around."

"Go blabbing around and *admit* that one of my charges took a shot at the headmistress? I'd die of shame," she said with a wink.

Turning back to Aylan, Gala asked, "so when's Liam coming? And more importantly, do I get to meet him?"

"Of course you can meet him," said Aylan rolling her eyes. "Here, read his letter. I'd tell you what it says myself, but if Emmie keeps yanking my hair so hard, all you're going to hear are shrieking expletives."

Gala laughed, and began to read aloud:

Lan,

This morning Henriette came charging into my room to ask if I knew anything about an incident that happened at your school. Apparently the headmistress's assistant told her daughter who is the school's assistant cook, who told her cousin who is our assistant cook, who told dad's butler, who told Henriette, that someone tried to assassinate the headmistress during etiquette class. Or something like that. (Really, you have to take etiquette class? It must be SO boring to be a princess.) Anyway, if that was you, I'm way more proud of you than I ever thought possible. And if it wasn't, then somewhere at that school is a princess I definitely want to meet. Either way, I told Henriette I had no idea what she was talking about, so if she ever asks, don't tell her about the slingshot. She's already

channeling all the attention she used to give you toward me, and I'm about at my wit's end. Speaking of that, I've decided to sneak out and pay you a visit on Saturday morning. I have to show you what dad got me for my birthday last week. Meet me down at the beach in front of the school by 8 o'clock. I'll have Cole and Gunner with me, so bring a friend or two as long as they aren't too prissy or dull. See you then,

Liam

"Oh how fun!" exclaimed Gala. "You'd *better* be taking me with you. Who are Cole and Gunner? Are they cute?"

Aylan laughed. "Don't be dumb; who else would I take but you? You fit Liam's qualifications perfectly, and our party would be too large if I invite the other girls."

"Well I'm glad you don't find me snobby or boring. Liam's standards are remarkably high. Did he inherit them from your father?"

Aylan punched Gala on the shoulder. Even though their group of friends seemed to be expanding every day, Gala was still the only one who could get away with joking about her mother's questionable upbringing.

"For goodness sake! Can't you hold still for two minutes so I can fix your hair?" complained Emmie.

"Maybe I should just wear it down today?"

"Not a chance. A deal's a deal."

Aylan rolled her eyes, but held her head still. "Cole is the son of the Duke of Sarasone," she said, addressing Gala's question, "and Gunner is the son of the groom to Liam's horse. The three of them have been running around together ever since I can remember."

"Huh," said Gala, "that's an odd mix. You know Aylan, you really have a family full of freaks. How does one go about becoming lifelong friends with the son of their horse's groom? I mean really, can you get much lower than a servant to your *horse*? The men in your family must seek out inappropriate people to associate with on purpose."

Well if that's the case," Aylan answered, "Liam is certainly going to love meeting *you*, half-breed."

The girls broke in a fit of laughter, and Emmie just shook her head.

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Olivia's hand was suspended in mid-air just outside Gala's door. The chambermaid had arrived earlier than normal to fix Gala's bed, and so the door was open ever so slightly. She'd meant to knock gently to avoid pushing it open further, until a snippet of conversation from inside made her pause: Gala and Aylan were talking about Liam. Carefully, Olivia placed her palm flat on the door on leaned forward enough to move it. The voices inside became clearer.

"Liam is coming to visit," Olivia murmured to herself after a moment. "And it doesn't sound like I'm invited."

Abruptly, Olivia dropped her fist and turned on her heel. *Who says I need an invitation to their little get-together? Saturday at eight o'clock sounds like a perfect time for a morning stroll along the beach. And once I've met him, he's as good as mine anyway.*

Olivia walked to breakfast without bothering to wait for Aylan and Gala. Her perfect plan for becoming Aylan's one and

only friend had failed spectacularly, and that meant only one thing: Plan B had officially begun.

Chapter Thirteen

He was there in front of her again, his green eyes searching her face. She knew this part so well. She was afraid he studied her with derision, and, ashamed of that fear, she refused to let him see it. So instead of turning away, she held his gaze proudly…

And then it happened.

He said her name.

She couldn't hear it, but she saw the shape of it on his mouth. She smiled… and so did he.

In the background she heard the chatter of her friends. They were whispering about how handsome he was, except Lily, who was good-naturedly cursing her for tricking them into taking their hair down.

"Well played, you wretch!" Lily grumbled. All the girls giggled.

"I don't think it would have mattered," said Marisol.

"You're right," answered Lily. "The way he's staring at Aylan? We could be riding in this carriage topless and he probably wouldn't notice."

"Lily!" cried Marisol, scandalized.

"Hey Aylan, how'd you get him to fall in love with you that fast?"

"Yeah," piped Rafaela, what's the secret?"

"I don't think she can even hear us," said Marisol with a giggle.

"Do you think that's Olivia's brother, Garrick?"

"It has to be; no one else would have those eyes."

"I wonder what he's doing here?"

In the part of her mind that knew she was dreaming, Aylan remembered that soon the carriage would reach the end of the road and that's when the dream would end…

Except this time, it didn't.

This time, instead of watching her ride away, Garrick took a step forward… and then another. The carriage was no longer moving, and she was suddenly in it all alone. In an instant he was before her, gazing up at her. He reached up to brush her cheek with his fingertips, and she leaned into his touch.

"Aylan," he said again, and this time the sound filled her ears. "Aylan, it's time to wake up. Wake up, Aylan… seriously."

"Seriously, wake up, for goodness *sake*!" hissed Gala. "Don't think I won't hit you with this pillow, because I *will*!"

With a start, Aylan opened her eyes, and screamed. Gala was hovering directly over her, brandishing her feathery weapon.

"*Shhhh*," said Gala, giving Aylan a mouthful of silk and feathers. "Are you trying to wake the whole castle?"

"Gala, don't *ever* do that again," Aylan gasped, trying to catch her breath. She was used to Gala's hovering, but that hadn't prepared her to see her friend's entire body suspended in midair above her.

"Look, I know you want to stay in bed and dream about whatshisface," said Gala, "but we're supposed to be meeting your

brother in less than an hour!" She clapped a hand to her mouth as soon as the words were out, but it was too late.

"And how exactly would you know who I dream about?" asked Aylan, feeling her face begin to flush.

Sheepishly, Gala drifted down until she was cross-legged above the bed. "Well, er, the thing is… I think I'm getting better at this hearing-hidden-thoughts thing. I'm not sure why exactly — maybe it's just because I spend so much time with you — but the morning after we saw Olivia's brother, I could tell you'd dreamt about him, and that you didn't want to tell me."

Aylan narrowed her eyes. "Exactly how much do you see?"

"Don't worry, not much. Just a flash of green eyes from time to time. I wouldn't even know whose they were, but let's face it: there probably isn't another guy in the world with eyes like his. But don't be embarrassed; most of the girls in our class are probably still dreaming about him, too."

"Probably?" asked Aylan. "Wouldn't you know that definitively?" A strange streak of jealousy shot through her; she didn't like the idea of him turning up in any dreams but hers.

"No, it's not like that. Ugh, this is so difficult to explain! I can't tell if the other girls are thinking about Garrick because they aren't trying to hide their thoughts. We could go down to breakfast tomorrow and start a conversation about him, and I bet they'd all jump in. But I'm guessing you'd stay quiet…which is why I can hear you, but not them."

"So basically, you're telling me that it's going to be impossible for me to actively keep any kind of secret from you?"

"Probably."

"Well then, you can go ahead and forget about your surprise birthday party."

Gala smiled. "You know, you don't *have* to keep secrets from me in the first place. You're my best friend, and that means we're *supposed* to talk about boys. Plus, you know I'd never tell anyone your secrets. I promise." Gala cocked her head to the side and looked at Aylan strangely. All of a sudden, her brown eyes began to glow, brighter and brighter, until it looked as if they'd been entirely replaced with molten metal. They shone for only a second or two, and then abruptly returned to normal.

"What the heck was *that*?" shrieked Aylan, jumping up in alarm. "Your eyes — "

Gala laughed. "Oops, didn't mean to scare you. It's just another fairy thing. We have to take the promises we make very seriously, because they bind us. Magically. So now you know I'll never tell your secrets — because I can't. I'd choke on the words."

"Like, choke choke?"

"Yep."

"You'd literally choke?"

"And possibly die."

"I believed you before," said Aylan, eyeing Gala warily. "No need to go to all that trouble."

"No trouble at all! I'm glad my little show got you out of bed finally, because according to your clock, we're supposed to be meeting some cute boys at the beach in forty minutes — so please get moving!"

Aylan rolled her eyes. "Don't be ridiculous, Liam isn't cute. He's my *brother* for goodness sake!"

Gala smacked Aylan's bottom. "That's how I know he's cute. Because he's *your* brother and *you're* just so adorable, little mutt."

Aylan swatted Gala away with a giggle and headed for her dressing room. She selected a pink cotton dress that had somehow survived her mother's wardrobe cleansing, and slipped on her old battered clogs and a cream wrap. After twirling her hair into a loose knot at her nape, and securing it with a sapphire pin, she was ready to go. By then Gala was back, similarly dressed in a blue gown and yellow wrap patterned with roses.

"Is that my dress?" asked Aylan, amused.

This time her friend didn't look at all repentant. "Aylan, if we're sharing secrets we may as well share clothes. Besides, I didn't grow up on the coast like you did, so I don't have any clothes for this type of situation. All my stuff is frilly and girly, and we both know how Liam feels about frilly and girly."

"I swear, Gala," said Aylan, rolling her eyes, "I think it's *you* that wants to marry my brother, not Olivia."

"Don't act like you wouldn't prefer me over her for a sister."

"Good point."

The girls slipped into the corridor, creeping silently toward the front door, and in another moment they were outside. Aylan took a deep breath, smiling as she felt the sunshine on her skin. "Hey, halfbreed," she said, "bet you can't catch me!"

"Huh?"

But Aylan was already tearing down the drive at full speed, reveling in the litheness of her body, and laughing as she yelled for Gala to follow.

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The view of the sea from their perch atop a scrub-lined dune was beautiful in the morning light, yet Garrick barely

noticed. He was far more intrigued by the two figures sitting in the sand a hundred yards down the shore. "Are you sure you heard correctly?" he asked. "It's eight-thirty, and still no Liam. Doesn't look like he's going to show."

"Today has to be the right day," answered Olivia, "otherwise why would Aylan and Gala be sitting around on the beach flinging sand at each other? He'll be here."

"I hope you're right. I'm giving you another fifteen minutes and then I'm going back to bed, and you can keep watch for your lover-boy alone."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "Don't be stupid. You'll stay put all day if you have to, because you know damn well why we're here. Besides, you owe me after that ridiculous scene you made in front of my class last week."

"Yes, I know all about why we're here," said Garrick with a sigh. "Or at least why *you're* here," he added in his mind. He was happy to help Olivia along with her plan if he could, but he knew the real reason he'd agreed to this adventure: His mind had been filled with Aylan since the day she rode by in her carriage, and now he wanted to meet her.

"When they do get here, try not to give an encore performance of that staring match," added Olivia, as if reading his mind. "I know it's difficult to restrain yourself around someone with such fine credentials as she has, but I have faith you can manage."

"I've already told you, I find Aylan remarkably plain," answered Garrick with as haughty an air as he could muster. "You can't blame me for being curious, but now that I've had a good look at her, I've no need to ever see her again. *You're* the one

dragging me into her company. As I said, I'm happy to go back to bed."

Garrick held his breath as he felt his sister studying him. "No," she answered finally. "I need your help. And you're right; I was curious to get a good look at her too, at first. But like you said, she's nothing special."

Garrick exhaled, pleased that the lie had been believable. He wanted to keep staring down the beach at the figure he knew to be Aylan, but instead he turned toward the sea. There was a small ship on the horizon that he'd been lazily observing, and now that it was within clearer view, he found his curiosity piqued. From its size, it could have been a well-to-do fisherman's boat, but he'd never heard of any fisherman successful enough to be able to spend money on the luxurious trappings he was beginning to discern on this particular vessel. Its hull was painted a dark blue, and all the trim was a crisp white. The wake it cast suggested that it had been cut for speed rather than practicality, and the glitter of gold thread in the crest emblazoned on its heavy canvas sail spoke to a great deal of expendable income. With a start Garrick realized who it must be, and he chuckled in the knowledge that Olivia's intent stare down the beach was for nothing.

"Well, Olivia, I'll say this. At least you've picked a man who's got style."

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Further down the beach, Aylan had also spotted her brother's new form of transport, and she jumped up eagerly to wave. The tall figure on deck waved back, his grin so big that it was visible even from that distance.

"Your brother has his own ship?" asked Gala, clearly impressed.

"It must be the birthday present he was talking about in his letter," answered Aylan. "Believe me, if you could see some of the other things he's tried to sail, you'd realize it's a very practical gift."

In another few minutes the ship found sand beneath its belly, and Liam threw down a plank and trotted into the shallows, followed by Cole and then Gunner. He scooped his sister up in a hug and spun her around. "Well, what do you think? Isn't she gorgeous?" he asked, boyish excitement all over his face.

"I *love* her," said Aylan. "What did mom say? I can't believe she approved of this!"

"Well, I have a feeling she was just as surprised as I was when dad walked us down to the beach after my birthday dinner and we saw her for the first time. But mom's handled it fairly well. Dad had Gunner secretly taking sailing lessons because he knew I wouldn't want a whole crew getting in the way, so the three of us can handle her all on our own."

"So you've been promoted from stable boy to first mate, Gunner?" asked Aylan.

"Sure have," he said, grinning and opening his arms wide for a hug. "But I'm still waiting for my biggest promotion when you finally agree to marry me."

"Ask me again next year."

"Aw, you always say that."

"I'm only seventeen, I couldn't possibly think about marriage yet."

"Fair enough. Next year."

Aylan smiled. "And you, Cole, how is everything? I feel like it's been forever since I've seen you three!"

"Things are good. Well, *were* good, until a second ago when my former best friend proposed to my girl right in front of me!" He crushed Aylan in a hug, and over her head growled at Gunner, "this princess is mine!"

"You wish she was yours!"

"You wish you didn't smell like a horse's ass!"

Gunner charged at Cole, and Aylan tumbled to the ground laughing as the two broke into a mock fight there on the sand. Liam rolled his eyes and turned to Gala, doing his best to ignore the fray.

"Sorry, my friends are a pair of jackasses. I'm Liam, Aylan's older, more intelligent, better looking brother."

"Please," interrupted Aylan, looking up from the skirmish for her hand. "I'll allow for the older part. He's definitely my *older* brother."

Liam grinned and took Gala's hand to kiss it. "And you are?"

"I'm Gala, Aylan's suite-mate. It's so good to meet you."

"Likewise," he said. "So, are you ladies up for a sail along the coast? There's a trading port a few miles south of here that we could go to, or if you want we could…"

Abruptly his words trailed off, and his eyes focused on something beyond Gala's shoulder. His jaw dropped. The two girls turned to see what had rendered him so suddenly speechless, and the sight they beheld caused both to groan audibly: Olivia and Garrick, both looking indescribably gorgeous, were headed in their direction, presumably on a morning stroll.

Seeing no alternative, Aylan raised her hand in greeting and then quickly glanced down to ascertain her clogs were fully concealed beneath her dress.

"Don't worry," Gala murmured softly, "you look beautiful."

"Well hello there!" said Olivia once she reached them. "I didn't expect to find anyone else here at this hour!"

"Neither did we," said Aylan, trying to match her friend's cheerfulness. "What a happy coincidence." Internally she was fuming that Liam couldn't have arrived on time for once in his life. If he had, they'd be safely at sea by now, and Olivia and her brother would have continued their walk unimpeded.

"Aylan, are you going to introduce us to your friends?" asked Liam pointedly after a moment.

"Oh, uh, of course. Liam, this is Princess Olivia DiBourgesse of the Southern Country, and, uh, this —"

"Is my brother, Garrick," finished Olivia.

"A pleasure to meet you," said Liam. "And these are my friends, Cole and Gunner."

"Pleasure," said Olivia, nodding in their general direction without taking her eyes off Liam. "So what are all of you up to so early on a Saturday?"

"Well, actually, I just sailed in to show Aylan my birthday present," answered Liam, gesturing toward the ship.

"Oh, it's beautiful!" Olivia cooed.

"*She's* beautiful," Aylan corrected.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"The ship. You don't refer to a ship as *it.*"

"That's true, 'she' is the proper pronoun. Or you could call her by her name," said Liam, taking Olivia's hand and pointing it toward the hull.

"*Ellesson Always*" she read, arching an eyebrow.

"Ellesson as in 'Elle's son.' Always. For my mother."

"How very c*harming*," answered Olivia with a wink.

Liam grinned. "I think dad knew the name would soften mom up a bit. He didn't exactly get her approval before having Ellesson built."

"Naughty, naughty," Olivia purred.

"'Pragmatic' is probably a better word," laughed Liam. "We were just about to take her out for a sail down the coast; if you have time, I'd love for you and your brother join us."

"How fun! Of course, we'd both be delighted to go." Olivia grabbed Liam's arm before he had a chance to offer it, and the two began moving toward the gangplank with Cole and Gunner eagerly in tow. Gala and Aylan fell in step a few paces behind them, trying to resign themselves to the expansion of their party.

"Really subtle isn't she?" muttered Gala.

"Subtle like a wooden bat to the forehead, yes," answered Aylan.

Gala snorted. "Looks like we're stuck with her for the whole day."

"And her brother."

"Ha! I know you're not disappointed by *that.*"

"Well it presents a bit of a problem, you see."

"What problem?"

"Well I was hoping to have a bit of fun this morning… but I'm not sure how happy Garrick will be with me if I make his sister lose her breakfast."

"What in the world are you talking about?"

Aylan gave her friend a wicked grin. "Gala, did I ever tell you I'm a pretty good sailor?"

"As in, you have good sea legs?"

"No, as in, I am going to sail this ship."

Gala grabbed Aylan's elbow. "You're joking!"

"Just be glad your feet don't touch the ground, and hold on tight, halfbreed."

"You are literally my favorite person ever," said Gala, trying to control her laughter.

The girls linked arms, and merrily boarded the ship.

Chapter Fourteen

Garrick boarded the vessel several paces behind Aylan and Gala. He knew the proper thing would have been to offer his hand to help them aboard, but he didn't trust himself to take Aylan's hand with Olivia nearby.

"What can I do to help?" he asked, once onboard.

"That depends," answered Gunner. "Have you sailed before?"

"I haven't."

"That's alright," said Gunner, tossing him a length of rope. "Aylan can show you how to get that boom back around while we pull up the anchor."

"Aylan can… what?"

"Oh never mind that," said Aylan, suddenly appearing at his elbow, and taking the rope. "I can do it myself."

"That's my girl," said Gunner with approval, and a little more emphasis on the '*my*' than Garrick felt comfortable with. "Show him how it's done, then we'll get you on the wheel."

"Are you insane?" cried Garrick. "You can't ask a princess to pull ropes like a deckhand!"

"On this ship, that's what she is," said Gunner with a wink. "A princess on land, but at sea she's part of our crew."

"And what are *you* on land?"

"The guy who mucks out Liam's horse's stall," answered Gunner with pride.

Aylan giggled. "Someday we're going to find him a better job. Now," she added, turning her attention to Garrick, "are you ready to take orders?"

"From you?" he asked, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

"From me."

And she looked so absurdly lovely standing tall on the deck of that ship, confidently grasping her coil of rope, that Garrick couldn't help himself. He bowed to kiss her hand, and looking up at her, answered, "I am yours to command." He was pleased to hear her breath catch in her throat.

"Garrick, could you come here please?" called Olivia suddenly. "*Now.*"

"Looks like Aylan isn't the only girl to give you orders, eh mate?" said Gunner with a wink. "That's just as well, we can manage fine, just the two of us. Better go help your sister."

Garrick felt his cheeks reddening at the clear tone of gloat in Gunner's voice, and turned abruptly so as not to show it. He stalked off toward his sister, hoping uncharitably that both Gunner and Liam's horse would develop gastrointestinal distress in the very near future.

"What do you need Olivia?" he asked as evenly as possible.

"Why don't you sit down with me?" she answered, ignoring his tone.

"What do you need?" he hissed again.

"What I *need* is for you not to fawn over Aylan like a schoolboy in love."

Garrick sat down hard on the pile of rope beside his sister. "And how would you have me treat her?"

"As she deserves. A pretty face shouldn't be enough to make you forget how far beneath you she is."

"I've never heard you admit she's pretty before."

"She has a certain rough appeal, I suppose… in a common sort of way."

"Livy, stop," said Garrick, looking his sister full in the face. "Let's stop pretending she's not beautiful. She is."

"The *stable boy* certainly seems to think so."

"That's quite rich coming from the girl who wants to marry her brother."

"Will you keep your voice down! You know my reasons for wanting to marry Liam. If we're ever going to break the curse, I don't have a choice."

"You have plenty of choices."

"Garrick, I will not discuss this with you again. You should be grateful. I'm doing this as much for you as for myself. The least you could do is help me instead of making it more difficult!"

"Have you considered that that's exactly what I'm trying to do?"

"By making a fool of yourself?"

"Olivia, your idea of becoming a friend to Aylan in her hour of need hasn't worked. Neither did your 'insurance policy'

with that despicable etiquette pamphlet. Aylan has no 'need' — she holds her own among the other princesses, and has plenty of friends. Clearly you need all the help you can get if you're going to get to Liam."

"And?"

"*And* what shot would you possibly have with him if he thinks your twin brother despises his beloved sister? Your beautiful face will only carry you so far, you know."

Olivia narrowed her eyes. "If this is an act, then fine. But don't play the part so well that even I forget you're acting."

"She's fascinating, Olivia, so you can't possibly be surprised that I'm fascinated. But I'll do my best to make it clear when I'm acting and when I'm not."

"That's not a very reassuring answer. And what could you possibly find so interesting?"

"Well, for one thing," said Garrick, his eyes focusing on a sight beyond Olivia's shoulder, "have you ever seen a girl sail a ship before? I haven't. *That's* pretty interesting."

Olivia's head whipped around and she gasped. Garrick chuckled and stood, glad to be free of her questioning. Aylan had indeed taken the wheel of the ship, and he was quite taken with how lovely she looked. He'd seen plenty of princesses in his life, each bred to stand straight and project an air of her own superiority, but this was something entirely different. Aylan stood not like a queen, but a king. Her hands grasped the wheel with the surety of one used to being in command, and her eyes scanned the sea as if it was her kingdom. It was one of the most bewitching sights he'd ever beheld.

Garrick didn't realize that Cole had wandered over from where he'd been working at the front of the ship, until he heard

him say quietly, "that's exactly the way a woman ought to be, don't you think? A woman like her I'd follow to the end of the earth."

"She'd be worth following," answered Garrick in the same muted tone.

Cole ducked his head. "Er, sorry. Sometimes I don't realize when I'm speaking out loud."

"That's ok, I won't tell her you said so."

"If I were any kind of man, I *would* tell her," said Cole with a half-smile. "Ironic that the one of us who cleans up horse dung for his living, is the one who has the nerve to propose to her over and over again, eh?"

"Gunner has *proposed* to Aylan?" Garrick asked, feeling a surge of jealousy.

"Oh, just about every time he sees her, since we were about seven or eight. Can you blame him?"

"I guess not."

"We've both known her so long though, I think she'll always see us as her brothers."

Just then Aylan glanced in their direction, and her eyes caught Garrick's. He was sure he saw a smile teasing the corners of her lips, and he hoped it was for him — when suddenly she took the wheel and jammed it hard toward starboard. The ship, which had been rising and falling with the waves, began bucking wildly from side to side. Garrick stumbled backward, clutching the rail for support, and looked up at Aylan, stunned.

"Sorry," she mouthed at him, but her eyes held no hint of apology. In fact, he'd never seen anyone look less sorry. She was clearly enjoying herself as she guided the ship through the choppiest path she could find in the swells, the violent motion doing nothing to upset her balance. She laughed as the wind

whipped her hair around her face, and Garrick couldn't help but laugh with her.

"That's our girl," said Cole with a grin. "Definitely not the princess-iest princess you'll ever meet. Er, Princess Olivia? Are you alright?"

"Livy!" cried Garrick, turning to his sister. She was hunched forward on her pile of rope and quite pale, even a bit green, around the edges.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine," she gasped. "I just need… a minute. Or two."

"Here," said Cole, offering his arm, "let's move away from the bulwark. The movement is less pronounced toward center. You'll feel better soon." Olivia glared at her brother, but allowed herself to be led away.

"Maybe you better go tell Aylan to behave herself," said Cole, looking back over his shoulder.

"Yes," answered Garrick, happy for the excuse to go speak to her. "Yes, I think I'd better."

Garrick made his way carefully toward where Aylan stood behind the ship's wheel, and as he did, her eyes turned and caught his. Just as she'd done that day in the carriage, Aylan continued the gaze, never breaking eye contact until he stood before her.

"Have you come to demand that I behave myself?" she asked him.

"No, it's more like I've come to surrender," he answered with a grin. "My white flag is at home though. Will you spare my sister?"

"I should demand some sort of outrageous ransom."

"I have nothing to offer you but my hand," he said, extending it to her. He was pleased to note the sound of her breath

catching for the second time that morning. "Would you be so kind as to give a land-loving prince a tour of this beautiful vessel?"

"Or I could teach you to sail it instead. Are you the type of prince who'd allow a princess to be his instructor?"

Garrick cocked his head to the side. "Why do I feel like this is some sort of test?" he asked.

Aylan grinned. "Maybe it is. Not many people outside of my brother and his friends have ever seen me sail before; I'm not sure how others will react to it."

"Well your secret is safe with me. But I'm not sure Olivia's stomach could handle a novice at the wheel after your expert performance. Rain check?"

"Yes, you should definitely take a rain check," said Gala, suddenly appearing with Liam in tow. "Because it's my turn to try."

Liam grinned sheepishly. "She talked me into a quick lesson."

Garrick noticed the sparkle in Gala's eye as she smiled up at Liam, and in a surge of brotherly compassion called his sister over. "Livy, perhaps Liam could give you a lesson as well? It might help with the sea-sickness."

"Of course," said Liam. "That's a great idea."

Gala's sparkle turned into an ill-concealed pout, which Garrick ignored. With Olivia occupied and in his debt, he could freely enjoy a few moments alone with Aylan. "Shall we?" he asked, offering her his arm.

"Sure," she said, giving the wheel a hard spin as she stepped back. The sudden jolt nearly toppled him, but after some drunken stumbling, he retained his footing.

"Watch your step," she said with a wink.

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The tour of the ship was short and uneventful once Aylan had surrendered control to gentler hands. After she'd pointed out all the main features and given Garrick some basic instruction, they found themselves at the back of the ship — or what Garrick now knew to be the 'stern.'

"Since we're looking toward the sea, we're facing 'aft,'" said Aylan. "And that way is 'fore,'" she added, with a thumb over her shoulder.

They leaned against the rail and stared for several minutes at the ship's wake in the sparkling water. Garrick found himself oddly at a loss for words. Normally he had no trouble speaking to women — they'd flush under his stunning green gaze, and after that it didn't seem to matter much what he said. But there was something about Aylan; he found that he wanted to impress her with more than just his looks. He wanted to say things that were intelligent and witty. He wanted to make her laugh. It was different, and because it was Aylan —Aylan Charming of all the princesses on earth! — it was also intensely unsettling.

"So, uh, how long did it take Liam to teach you so much about sailing?"

"Liam? Oh, he didn't really teach me, not exactly. Some of the earliest memories I have are of being first mate as he tried to sail his homemade boats. More often than not they wouldn't float for more than a few minutes — probably because he was determined, absolutely *determined,* back then to have at least one cannon on board, even if the boat was nothing more than a halved whiskey barrel. In that respect, you could say Liam taught me a lot more about swimming than sailing."

Garrick chuckled. "It sounds like you were given quite a lot of freedom as a child."

"Yes, well, after a few years of that our parents let us go out on some of the Royal Naval ships as they practiced maneuvers and scouted the coast. The captains were instructed to treat us like deckhands, and they worked us to the bone. That's where we really learned."

"Your parents sent you out… as deckhands?"

"Yes, is that surprising?"

"That you were taught to sail at all is surprising. But if sailing was the goal, couldn't you just be apprentices to the captain?"

"And learn to give orders but nothing else?"

"Aylan, your brother is going to be king, and you, presumably, will be a queen. In this instance, learning to give orders doesn't sound that impractical, does it? But I guess it makes sense, since …well."

"Since what?"

"Nothing."

"Since what, Garrick?"

"Well, since your mom started at the bottom, right? I mean, no proper queen would think it appropriate for her children — especially a daughter! — to be on a ship full of men, pulling ropes and taking orders. But I guess your mom wouldn't have really known any better, right?" Garrick looked away from the sea just in time to see the storm clouds rolling across Aylan's face and immediately shut his mouth.

"Oh, by all means, Garrick, keep going. Tell me about how my mother couldn't possibly be a good queen — a proper queen — because she was once a servant. I insist. And when we're done,

we can discuss how wonderful a job *your* mother did teaching you to be a gentleman."

Garrick was taken aback by the venom in her voice. "Whoa, Aylan, calm down. I didn't mean to make you so defensive. What I said… it just came out wrong, that's all."

"And when you said I'd *presumably* be a queen one day, was that a mistake too?"

"Well presumably you will be!"

"Presumably, but not certainly? Do you think every prince will find my pedigree so off-putting that I end up an old maid?"

"Of course you won't end up an old maid! Hasn't the boy who cleans Liam's horse's stall proposed to you a dozen times already? I can't imagine any of the other princesses at school have received half so many proposals." It was an attempt at humor, and it failed. Spectacularly.

"How dare you."

"Aylan, that's not what I meant. If you would just calm down. Obviously I know you could do better than Gunner." The words were no more than a half second past his lips, when she slapped his face. "Damn it, Aylan!" He glanced around quickly to see if anyone had noticed the slap, and was relieved that the rest of their party were all still absorbed in teaching the other princesses to sail. He felt his temper rising quickly. He'd just been slapped. Slapped! "You're taking everything I say completely the wrong way! If you would just stop a moment and *listen.*"

"No, you listen! If I were to fall in love with Gunner, I'd marry him in an instant. And he'd treat me like a queen, and not just the wife-of-the-man-who-cleans-stables. That's a real prince. You could make me a queen, but treat me as a servant, and you know what? I wouldn't have you!"

"And who says I'd have *you*?" hissed Garrick, his cheek still singing.

"Because you don't think any prince would have me, do you?"

"I don't know, I don't know all the other princes!"

"But in theory?"

He knew he shouldn't answer her. Or if he did, he should lie. But damn it, that slap had really hurt. "I can't speak for anyone else. But I, personally, wouldn't call your situation ideal. It'd be enough to give me… pause."

"Well, enjoy your pause. I have a ship to help sail, and I've no time to wait for people like you."

Garrick opened his mouth and then shut it again as he watched her sweep elegantly away.

So much for being witty and charming.

Chapter Fifteen

The small port town of Mylamaire came into view after a little over an hour at sea. It was a pretty expanse of houses built into the side of a mountain, mostly white with blue shutters framing window boxes tumbling over with red blossoms. A bustling market sat right where the slope met the shore, serving both the inhabitants of the village, and the travelers from all over the world that stopped for rest in the harbor. It was a beautiful sight, and perhaps never so welcome to anyone as it was to the passengers of the blue ship that glided smoothly into port that morning.

Aylan was desperate to be away from Garrick, who was no less eager to be away from her. Gala was anxious to know what had transpired during the animated conversation she'd seen happening at the back of the ship, and Liam was looking forward to a pleasant walk with Gala on his arm. Olivia was more than ready to feel the solid earth beneath her feet and to restart the flirtation with Liam

she'd been too queasy to carry on while at sea. Cole and Gunner were simply satisfied to be spending the day in the presence of three rather beautiful princesses, and were anticipating all the marvelously jealous glances they'd be getting from the men of the village.

The gangplank dropped, and Aylan nearly threw herself down it, so eager was she to be free. Gala, having the advantage of her unusual relationship with gravity, followed closely behind, while the rest hung back. Liam, Cole, and Gunner, having no crew to handle the task, had to tie down and secure the ship, and Olivia was not so seasick anymore that she would pass up an opportunity to be near Liam without Gala's competition for his attention. Garrick was left in a quandary. His chivalrous side objected to two princesses walking alone in a strange place with no protection, and his selfish side objected to being once more in the path of Aylan's temper. He satisfied his conscience by remembering Cole's assertion that Aylan wasn't the 'princess-iest' of princesses — clearly the understatement of a lifetime — but put on a show of checking to see how Olivia was feeling anyway. No one could fault him for choosing to care for his sister rather than following after Aylan. Aylan didn't need anyone to take care of her, and if she did, well, that should be Liam's job.

Olivia saw through her brother's uncharacteristic solicitousness in an instant, but held her tongue. There was something in the way Garrick looked at Aylan that made her more comfortable with allowing Liam to think she had a weak stomach and needed tending, than with encouraging Garrick to leave.

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The marketplace at Mylamaire was alive with activity. At every turn the girls encountered stalls full of charming and exotic wares — perfumes and spices from the east that sweetened the air, bolts of fabric in brilliant jewel tones, and crates of unusual birds and animals. Even in the crush of shoppers, the two friends stood out, marked by the fineness of their clothing and the sparkle of the enormous sapphire at Aylan's nape, which all but canceled out the anomaly of her shoes. It didn't take the merchants long to spot them, and within moments calls from all sides beckoned them into shops and stalls.

"Well, Gala, shall we do some shopping?" asked Aylan.

"I'm not sure we have much of a choice. Perhaps we can find something for the Winter Ball? I'm sick of hearing about the dresses all the other girls are having made for it; we might as well give in and start thinking of ours, too."

"Agreed. Plus, if we find fabric here, we can be fairly certain no one else will have the same."

"Excellent point."

The girls giggled as they attacked the piles of fabric at the nearest storefront with a vigor they'd have been embarrassed to show had Garrick or Liam been present.

"What do you think of this one?" asked Gala holding up a yellow satin. "Its festive right?"

"Beautiful! And perfect with your dark hair."

"Any idea how Liam feels about yellow?"

Aylan looked up from the skein of lace in her hands and rolled her eyes. "Seriously?"

"Hey, he's handsome and funny, and he has his own boat! You can hardly blame me. Plus you and Garrick can't have all the fun."

"Believe me, whatever Garrick and I were having, it wasn't fun."

"Really? From where I was, it looked like you two were getting along so well! Liam even joked that he didn't want to look back because if he caught Garrick kissing you, he didn't want to have to challenge him to a duel."

"If Liam actually threatened a duel, that was entirely for your benefit," Aylan answered with a laugh. "Trying to impress you with a tough-guy act or something. But there was definitely no danger of me being kissed."

"So what happened?"

"We had a fight. Or maybe it was just me having a fight, I don't know."

Gala opened her mouth to ask another question, but just then the merchant who oversaw the shop made his way over to them, bowing repeatedly the entire way.

"Beautiful ladies!" he cried. "What a pleasure to have you in my shop! Since I could tell even from across the room that you have exquisite taste, I decided to bring over my newest acquisition to show you. I think it would beautifully suit *you*, especially," he added, bowing again in Aylan's direction.

The girls watched as the merchant made a show of opening the muslin-wrapped bundle he held in his arms, revealing a roll of pale blue silk, shot through with strands of pure silver. Aylan gasped.

"Go on," said the merchant, "and touch it. You'll find that it is still so soft and supple as to be almost fluid, though it is believed to be nearly two hundred years old."

"Two *hundred*?" asked Gala skeptically.

"Indeed. It was recovered from a sealed chest in the deepest part of the jungle of Keirpali, in the same area where the wedding caravan of the Empress Sehra is thought to have disappeared two centuries ago. I can only imagine that this was meant to have made up her wedding dress."

"Really?" said Aylan. "What happened to her?"

"Well," answered the merchant leaning in close, "legends say she was spotted by a jungle prince who thought her so lovely that he wished to make her his queen. He sent his tribesmen down to kidnap her party, and held them until she would agree to marry him. It is said that he came to her every night to beg for her hand, and every night she refused his offer. You see, she would not be unfaithful to her fiancé, no matter the cost. Finally the prince, determined that she would refuse him no longer, summoned his shaman, and brought the ancient man to where the empress was housed with her companions. The prince ordered the youngest of the attendants, a girl with fiery red hair, to stand. The moment she did, the shaman turned her into a brilliant red bird, and cast her out into the jungle.

'Every night you refuse me, I shall take one of your companions and turn her into a bird,' said the prince. 'Take care that you do not refuse me much longer, or you shall find yourself all alone.'

The empress was not afraid, and she never changed her answer. On the tenth night, after all the others had been transformed, her own little sister was turned into a lovely yellow bird and flew off, yet Sehra remained steadfast. She proclaimed that the prince could continue for a thousand nights, and her answer would be the same.

'As you wish,' said he. He nodded toward the shaman, and turned to go. He didn't even look back to see what sort of bird Sehra became, for he didn't really care for her, he was only enamored by her beauty. When he left the room, he thought of her no more.

The shaman was impressed with the purity of Sehra's spirit, and knew of her longing to go to her beloved. He decided not to turn her into a bird of paradise like the others, confined for always to the jungle. Instead, he turned her into a dove of bridal white, and sent her off to find her home.

That is why you find doves at weddings as a symbol of love. They are the children of Sehra, the faithful empress."

"Wow," said Aylan, "what an incredible story."

"It is," said the merchant, "and you have before you the very fabric which she was meant to wear."

Gala burst into laughter. "That *is* an incredible story, to be sure, and I don't doubt that you heard it in your travels. But we both know this silk was probably loomed no more than a month ago, and no further away than the Brit-Mulholland textile mill in the next village over. And by the way, just to clarify — when you said 'this would beautifully suit you,' were you talking to Aylan, or the ridiculously large sapphire in her hair?"

The merchant's mouth dropped open and his eyes narrowed. "Who sent you?" he demanded. "I knew there was something suspicious about you with that jewel in your hair and those horrid shoes. Someone sent you to mess with me, who was it?"

"No, no," said Aylan. "We're not here to mess with you. I actually adore this silk, and I'd like to buy it… all of it."

"And she'd like to pay a fair price for it," added Gala with a smirk.

The merchant glared at the girls, but accepted a reasonable payment for the silk and then shooed them out of his shop.

"You know it's awfully handy having you as a friend," said Aylan as they turned into the street, "but I wonder if it would have been worth the extra gold pieces to wear a ball gown made of Empress Sehra's wedding fabric?"

"Well you can definitely still tell that story if you want. The only one who'd have known is me, and you know I won't tell your secrets."

"Speaking of secrets, is your gift getting stronger? I've never heard you pick up a secret quite so specifically as that before."

Gala laughed. "That had nothing to do with fairy powers. I saw a watermark on the muslin wrapping and remembered Olivia showing us a fabric sample with the same mark from Brit-Mulholland."

"Clever," said Aylan with a grin. "Now, should we keep looking for something for you, or wait to ask Liam what color he'd most like to see you wear?"

Gala punched her friend on the arm. "You wouldn't dare."

"Probably not. We should try to find them though; I'm surprised we haven't seen them yet."

The girls scanned the sea of faces around them for their companions, but though Aylan kept turning, something strange about the crowd in the direction of the pier made Gala pause.

"What's that?" she wondered, squinting, and allowing herself to drift a few inches higher into the air. "Is that…?"

"Gala, what are you doing?"

"Hold on a sec," said Gala, holding up a finger and drifting up further.

"Uh, you might want to come down a bit. There is a noticeable gap between you and the ground. Like, really noticeable. Gala?"

"It looks like a secret," murmured Gala, ignoring her friend. "But why would I be sensing a secret from a person I can't even see?"

She stared, fascinated, as the hazy aura of gold continued to move in their direction through the crowd, brightening as it came nearer. Just as she thought she could make out the brunette head of the man it was clinging to, Gala heard the first wisps of magical whispering.

I'll follow them a while… hopefully they'll get separated and I can grab Princess Charming… but if I have to, I'll take them both….

Gala's eyes widened in horror. "Aylan," she whispered, "I think you need to run."

"What did you say?"

It might even be better to take both… in case I need someone disposable to keep Miss Charming in line…

"NOW, Aylan! *RUN*!" Gala grabbed Aylan's arm and dragged her forward into the center of the wide road. She heard the dull thud of Aylan's parcel of silk drop to the ground, but she didn't look back, and Aylan didn't protest. As fast as they could, the girls wove through the jam of buggies and crates clogging the street, Aylan ducking under and around, and Gala leaping nimbly over. She cringed as she heard the gasps of the crowd, but there was no time to worry that her aerial display looked super-human. Whispers of gold flashed in her peripheral vision — their pursuer must haves seen them take off; he was nearly upon them.

At the far edge of the market a wide straightaway opened up, and they were finally able to pick up speed.

"Why are we running?" panted Aylan.

"No time to explain," answered Gala, looking back and seeing the secret's light still hovering over the crush of shoppers behind them. "Just keep going. I think we're losing him. It looks like he's still stuck in the crowd."

"*Who* is?"

"The person that wants to kidnap you."

"What?!"

Gala heard the renewed vigor of her friend's pounding footsteps behind her, but she knew they couldn't run forever. She scanned the street, looking for a place to hide, and spotted an alley just ahead that cut behind a row of houses. *If his view is blocked by the crowd, perhaps he won't see us turn. It'll have to do.*

"This way!" called Gala, rounding the corner into the alley. She realized only after she'd committed to the new path that it was far narrower than it had first appeared, and even worse, a horse-drawn carriage, wide enough to fill nearly the entire space, was bearing down upon her with alarming speed. Gala yelped and tried to backpedal, but slammed into Aylan who was just then entering the alley behind her, sending them both tumbling to the ground. Aylan screamed as she saw the carriage that was about to crush them, and Gala screamed as she saw the first waves of golden light enter the alley from the street. Scrambling to her feet as a new surge of adrenaline rushed magical fairy blood through her veins, Gala grabbed Aylan by the wrist, and did the only thing she could think of to save them: she launched herself into the air… and flew.

"Gala, how are you doing that?" gasped Aylan.

"I have no idea, but hold on tight!" she cried, struggling to gain enough height to clear Aylan's legs from the path of the speeding carriage.

She almost made it.

Aylan's ankle struck hard against the top corner of the carriage, causing her clog to bounce down into the street, and the occupants behind the curtained windows to cry out in alarm. Gala didn't slow. She descended back to the ground and continued her frantic pace without releasing her grip, and Aylan could do nothing but take great one-legged leaps on her uninjured ankle, counting on Gala's momentum for the rest.

The golden light continued to close in, and just as it was near enough to almost fill Gala's entire field of vision, Aylan screamed. Gala was pulled to a jarring halt, and then snapped back as if at the end of a tether, crashing into her friend, who likewise fell backwards into the hulking mass of their chaser's chest. In another instant an enormous hand was over Gala's nose and mouth, cutting her off from air.

"You know, I thought once you realized so early on that I was tracking you, that this would be a substantially more difficult chase," said their captor in a voice with a decidedly refined accent. "In another minute or so, you'll pass out from lack of oxygen, and then I can do what I like with you. But I'm willing to do this the nice way if you both promise not to scream again."

Gala nodded frantically, and gratefully sucked a huge lungful of air as he finally removed his hand. She turned to look up at his face, and was surprised to find that it perfectly fit his well-bred tone. He was handsome, in an aggressively masculine sort of way, and he was also the largest man she'd ever beheld, both in height, and in sheer muscular mass. A pair of dark chocolate eyes

stared down at the girls, but the expression in them didn't seem terribly sinister. In fact, he mostly looked amused.

"Who do you think you are to handle us this way?" hissed Aylan. "Unhand us. *Now.*"

"Now why would I do that when I've just gone to all the trouble of catching you?"

"If you had *any* idea the magnitude of your mistake, I believe you'd regret your size. It will make it much more difficult to hide as my father and his army are hunting you down."

"Ah, but my dear, that's what I want!" he said with a smile. "You think I don't know exactly who you are? I've been waiting such a long time to meet you, Princess Charming." He turned to Gala. "And I'm delighted you've brought a friend. Now both of you… come with me."

Chapter Sixteen

A church bell somewhere in the village tolled the hour, and it was Garrick who finally said aloud what they were all thinking: "Ok Liam, look. I barely know you, and I certainly know almost nothing about your sister or Gala, so maybe my worry is misplaced — but hadn't we better split up and start looking for them? It's been more than two hours since we left the ship."

"Don't be silly, Garrick," said Olivia, batting her eyes at Liam. "Aylan and Gala are big girls, and this is a small town. I'm sure their only danger is overspending whatever amount of gold they brought with them. Right, Liam?"

"No, I think Garrick's right. Aylan is more capable than most princesses, but it's been a long time. We should find them and make sure they're ok."

"Well of course we should!" Olivia cried. "Obviously. All I meant was I'm sure they're in no danger. But two hours alone, with

no chaperone, is way too long. It's such a shame my brother didn't think to follow them while you three were tending the ship. Then we'd have nothing to worry about at all."

"Naturally, my first thought was to see to you and your weak stomach," snapped Garrick, glaring down at his sister. "But you're right," he added. "I wish more than anything that I'd followed them."

"No worries, mate," said Liam, clapping Garrick on the back. "I'm sure they're fine. If my sister were as green as poor Olivia was by the time we got to port, she'd have had my first loyalty, too."

Garrick smirked as he watched the embarrassed color rise in Olivia's cheeks, and decided they were even. "Thanks, Liam," he said. "Now, all that's here is the village, the market, and the harbor, so that doesn't leave a lot of places they could be. Why don't I go on ahead and see if anyone up in the village has seen them, Cole and Gunner can go back toward the ship and see if maybe the girls are already waiting for us there, and Liam, you and Olivia can keep looking through the shops here for them. On my way back down I'll meet you two again, and we can all go back to the ship together to either regroup or head home, depending. Ok?"

"Perfect," said Olivia, shooting her brother a grateful look.

"Agreed," said Liam.

Garrick nodded and took off toward the village. He didn't care that his pace made it obvious to everyone how worried he was; something in his gut told him Aylan was in trouble, and all he cared about now was finding her.

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The cheerful whistle of the tea kettle in the kitchen where Aylan sat contrasted bizarrely with the panic in her chest. She eyed their captor warily as he pulled the water from the stove, and rummaged in a cupboard for teacups.

"It's so liberating don't you think?" he asked. "To do things for oneself, without having servants always around? I must say I'm surprised by how much I'm enjoying this."

"*Liberated* is hardly the word I would use to describe how I'm feeling," snapped Aylan. "Maybe if my ankles weren't tied to my chair, I'd understand what you're talking about."

The giant threw his head back and laughed. "Is she always so funny?" he asked Gala.

Gala grimaced, and refused to answer. Her ankles were also bound, but that didn't stop the rest of her from floating upward, leaving her in an awkward half-standing position over the seat of her chair.

"Are you sure you won't sit down? I'd like you to be comfortable. We're going to be here at least until Aylan's lover-boy gives up searching for her and leaves town, and I have no idea how long that'll take. Do you think we can measure his affection for her by how many days it takes him to give up?"

Aylan couldn't help a surprised burst of laughter. "Now I know for sure you're crazy," she said. "Do you really think I'm anything to Garrick? I'm not. He's probably personally pulling up the ship's anchor up as we speak."

Their captor sized her up for a moment and then grinned. "Ah, but how easy it is to get information from you, Miss Charming! Perhaps you are nothing to Garrick, but he must be something to you. I saw five others in your party this morning: Princess Olivia and Prince Garrick, along with three others I didn't

recognize — though I assume one must be your brother. I could have been referring to any of those three when I said 'lover-boy,' but you immediately assumed I meant Garrick. I find that very… interesting."

Aylan glared at him with as much loathing as she could muster, but again he laughed. "I hope that's not the look you've been giving him. If so, it's no wonder he doesn't care for you. But I guess it could also be that whole 'mother thing' you have going on. Probably a real turn-off for some, eh?" Aylan lowered her eyes and endured another of his chuckles. "I've hit upon it, haven't I?" he asked. "You have a thing for Prince Garrick, and Prince Garrick prefers *real* princesses. I bet that makes you quite angry."

"Why do you care about any of this?" snapped Aylan. "Send word of your ransom demand and be done with it. You know who I am, so you know my father can pay."

"Ha! Ransom money? What in the world would I do with that? You know how comfortable it is to have a king for a father. It leaves nothing to want."

"You claim to be a prince?" asked Aylan.

"I am," he answered, with an elegant bow. "Prince Ashton Kensington, at your service."

"At my service? Really?"

He grinned. "I suppose that's really more of a nicety. Clearly you are at *my* service — or rather, you will be. You see, you and I have a common enemy, and you are going to help me bring him down."

"What are you talking about? What enemy?"

"I'll tell you. Do you have time to hear a story?"

Aylan looked pointedly at her bindings and arched a brow. His laugh filled the room.

"You really are a funny one. I wasn't expecting that, but I'm certainly pleased. You're right, of course you have time for a story — you're my prisoners, you have time for whatever I say!" He looked once more at Gala. "Are you sure you won't sit down? This is a rather long tale, and your hamstrings must be burning by now. No? Well alright then, here we go:

Once upon a time — such a cliché, I know, but they all start that way. So, once upon a time, there were two brothers — twins — who were so identical, not even their parents could tell one from the other. On the day of the twins' birth, their father — who was king of a magnificent country — was pacing anxiously in the hallway outside the queen's chamber, waiting to hear that his beloved wife had given him an heir. They'd been married several years, and both longed for a child.

You can imagine the king's excitement, then, when the midwife's assistant nurse and the nurse's young daughter threw open the doors and presented him with not one son, but two.

Upon looking at their tiny faces, he exclaimed how absolutely identical his two boys were. 'I'd even wager they have the same number of eyelashes!' said he, filled with paternal pride. At this the nurse looked at her little daughter slyly. She knew that only one of the sons could inherit the throne — the eldest — and that she was the only one on Earth who could absolutely identify which of the two was the rightful heir. The midwife was tending to the queen, and couldn't know which of her helpers had taken the first baby, and which had taken the second, so the nurse found herself in possession of what she believed to be a very valuable secret.

She stepped forward as the king was cradling his babies, and said 'Your Majesty, take care that you don't move them about

too much. Right now I can faithfully identify which is your elder son, but if we don't do something to distinguish one from the other right away, it will be impossible not to get them confused.'

'You are right!' cried the king. 'Tell me, what would be the best way?'

The woman reached out, and tied a red ribbon to the ankle of the squirming infant in the king's right arm. 'There,' she said proudly.

'Ah!' cried the king, 'here is my first born son and heir, and the dearest wish of my heart fulfilled!'

'Not so fast, Your Majesty,' said the nurse. She reached out again, and this time tied a purple ribbon to the ankle of the child in the king's left arm. '*Now*, you have no more fear of mixing them up, for they are each clearly marked!'

'That is true,' said the king, annoyance tinting his voice. 'However, you have yet to tell me which is my eldest son. As of this moment, I only know them as my purple son and my red son. Clearly, that will not do.'

'Of course, how silly of me! Obviously information of that sort would be of tremendous value to you, would it not? I'm sure you are most anxious to learn it.'

'Indeed it would, and yes I am,' answered the king narrowing his eyes. 'Madam, forgive me for questioning your virtue when you have so recently helped deliver my most profound joy, but it seems you may be attempting to bribe me with the information you hold. If that is the case, then you are quite fortunate my hands are full. Otherwise, they'd surely find a place around your neck.'

The nurse did not flinch for she knew that as long as she held the secret, she would be perfectly safe from harm. 'Your

Majesty,' said she, 'I ask merely a trifle in exchange for the information I hold. Surely you will hear my small request?'

'Name it,' said the king through clenched teeth. His face was by then turning a lovely purple-red, that complimented his sons' ribbons in a charming way.

'All I ask, is that when your sons come of age, one of them be set aside as a husband for my daughter.'

The king, startled, turned to look at the small girl. She was no more than four or five years old, and had a lovely face and large blue eyes. Certainly she'd make a pretty wife for one of his sons, and the nurse had not absolutely specified *which* of the boys was required. The girl could marry the younger without much harm, he thought. After all, his sons couldn't grow up in competition for the crown; an order of succession was vital.

'I shall do as you ask,' said the king after a long moment of thought. 'You leave me little choice.'

He handed the boy in his right arm off to the girl with the big eyes, and extended his hand for the girl's mother to shake. The deal was struck.

'Your Majesty, the boy you hold in your arms is the true heir to the throne. The other, that my daughter holds, is his brother.'

'Then your daughter shall stay on and be a companion to my younger son. She and I will now take my boys back to their mother, who has been separated from them far too long. You, madam, may see yourself out, and do not think to put yourself in my presence again.'

"The nurse scurried away, pleased that she had secured a life in the palace for her child, and was never heard from again. The midwife, who lived in the castle as part of the queen's personal

staff, took pity on the heartbroken little girl and took her under her wing, eventually becoming like a surrogate mother. She taught the girl all about the arts of midwifery: the necessary herbs and draughts, the ways to ward off pain and evil spirits, and the way to read the stars on the day of a child's birth. But more than that, she taught the girl how to make potions and prepare powerful spells. For the midwife was not merely a midwife, but a fairy as well.

Many years passed, and the two infant princes were eventually grown. The younger proved himself a capable boy. He was clever and handsome, with easy manners and a quick wit, and he applied himself to his studies with enthusiastic fervor. By the time he was seventeen he could speak four languages, and was a master at horsemanship, swordplay, and all the other masculine arts. Perhaps his only flaw was a deep jealousy he harbored for his older brother, who, despite his laziness and frivolity, was destined to be king.

It was not only the younger brother who felt the unfairness of his position. The king, too, felt his second-born son infinitely more worthy of the crown, and began scheming to make it so. His two sons still resembled each other so identically that only their vastly differing demeanors could set them apart, and the King believed, correctly, that few people would notice if a switch were made. Of those, fewer would care.

There was only one problem that stood in his way: During the eighteen years that had passed, the little girl had also grown up, into a beautiful woman whom his younger son was deeply in love with. The king refused to allow an orphaned nursemaid to become queen of his country and taint the royal lineage, so he took her aside and offered her treasure enough to live out the rest of her life

in luxury, if only she would consent to go abroad and never return. The girl refused.

'If he is really so in love with me as you fear,' said she, 'then I would be a fool to leave, for I love him, too. We've been meant for each other since we were children.'

'Stupid girl,' said the king. 'Do you really believe that if presented with the choice, my son would choose you over the crown? I merely meant to make the way easier for you both. I shall have him as my heir, whether you go quietly or not. It's what is best for him, and it's what is best for this country.'

'If you are so sure of his choice Your Majesty, then summon him here now and ask him. If his heart is so easily turned as you predict, I will leave quietly. I will ask nothing of you then, for I want nothing of yours but your son.'

The king agreed to this, and dispatched a servant to retrieve his son for him. When the young man arrived, the king ordered all the servants out of the room, and had the doors shut tightly against eavesdroppers, before he began.

'My boy,' he said, 'it has been a long time now since the thought occurred to me that perhaps you would make a better king than your brother. However, the rules of succession are strict and absolute, and so until this afternoon, I felt powerless to change your circumstance.'

'Tell me father,' said the boy with excitement, 'what changed your mind?'

The king gestured toward the girl. 'She has.'

The prince beamed at his beloved, happier than he'd ever felt. She met his exultant gaze, and then looked at the King with utter astonishment and total confusion.

'You see,' continued the king, before the girl could have a chance to speak, 'only just now, she came to me to reveal she's been keeping a secret. She did not come willingly to confess; the Queen's companion — the midwife who helped deliver you — forced her to tell. It seems you were indeed my first-born son and heir, and this girl has known it your whole life without saying a word. She was determined to have you for a husband, and knew it would not be possible if you were king, for she is of lowly birth and not fit to be queen. So she attempted to deny you your birthright!

I told her when she came to me, that if she agreed to depart the country immediately, and leave a note explaining her treachery, I would be merciful. I offered her enough treasure to keep her quite well for the rest of her days, but she will not have it. So we are at an impasse. Will you keep her, and have your right to the throne denied a second time? Or will you banish her as you ought and take your rightful place in this world?'

It's hard to say who was more stunned: the prince upon discovering what his pride told him must be the truth, or the girl at being confronted with such a lie. He dropped her hand and glared at her with white rage. 'Get out,' he hissed.

She was so shocked at his easy acceptance of the tale, that she didn't try to defend herself. She ran from the room and from the castle, and never returned.

The king believed his way was now clear to push his younger son forward as heir, but he'd forgotten one thing: that old adage that begins with *'hell hath no fury...'* You see, the girl, though not a fairy, had learned all the fairies' magic at the knee of the midwife, and as such had become a powerful witch. But the king did not know this, so he was blindsided when the curse she conjured struck his family with the force of a blacksmith's hammer.

His two sons fell deathly ill, and the midwife, furious that she'd been used as a part of the king's lie, said there was nothing she could do to save them.

Just as it seemed the two young men had only hours to live, a letter arrived addressed to the king, which read:

Your Majesty,

You have taken from me the person I love most in this world, and I wish to return the favor. However, I believe it would break what is left of my heart to see him dead. I am therefore providing you with a way to save your sons, by sacrificing that which your heart holds second most dear: your country. Split it into two equal parts, and place one son as king over each half, and your sons shall live. You cannot hope that either will be a prosperous country, for the only way to restore to your land the glory which you now cherish will be for one son or the other to willingly give up his throne and allow the two lands to be reunited.

The king was heartbroken and humiliated at the prospect of tearing apart his country, yet he could not allow his sons to perish. He called for a map of his lands and carefully drew a new border, which exactly divided the country into two equal parts. Over the northern part, where great forests of fine timber and game surrounded dozens of small villages, he set his older son as king, and over the southern portion, which hugged the coastline and held many bustling port cities and centers for trade, he set his younger son. As soon as the task was complete, the two young men's health began to recover, though, curiously, when the younger

son woke, his deep brown eyes had been transformed into a shocking emerald green. Never again could one son be mistaken for the other, and for the rest of his life the younger would see a subtle reminder of the jealousy that was his downfall every time he looked in his mirror.

When they were well enough, the two princes set out in opposite directions to claim their thrones, each determined that they should never give up what they believed to be rightfully theirs. Shortly after, the old king died of a broken heart, which brings us to… the end."

"Well," said Gala, "that was depressing."

"And it didn't clear up why you've kidnapped us, either," added Aylan.

"I'm getting to that part," said Ashton. "You see, the witch's curse ensured that the two new countries were exactly equal not only in size, but in power. There have been attempts from both sides over the years to conquer the other by force, but every time it's happened the result is always the same: Both countries lose an identical number of men, and suffer the loss of an identical amount of resources. One side cannot not destroy and conquer the other without itself being destroyed and conquered. And of course, neither side will *willingly* give itself over to the other, so it seems as if all hope for reuniting the proud country built by my great-great-great grandfather is lost."

The girls were stunned.

"You mean to tell us that yours is one of the two countries left after the witch's curse?" asked Aylan.

"It is. I am descended from the older brother — the true heir to the kingdom — and I intend to reunite the two halves, and

take back what should have been mine. And you, my dear, are going to help me."

"Me?" asked Aylan. "How in the world would I be able to help you?"

"You're going to marry me."

"The hell I am! Are you insane? Do you think I find it romantic to be kidnapped and held hostage by a deranged prince on a power-trip? What in the world would *ever* make me want to marry you?"

"Won't you allow me to persuade you, my dear?" he asked softly, leaning down and stroking her cheek. "I'm told I can be rather charming when I try."

"No."

"Well then. I'll procure your acceptance in the less romantic way by spelling out the alternative. My original plan was not to kidnap you here at all — it fact, how would I have known you were going to be here? Today was a rather lucky coincidence, wouldn't you say?"

"I feel truly blessed," snapped Aylan sarcastically.

"As you should."

Aylan rolled her eyes and glared at him.

"The plan I had was to take you from the area around your school; I only just arrived in this village a few days ago to get my bearings before traveling there.

It was really very simple: I'd kidnap you and make it look like the country to the south of mine was responsible for your abduction. It wouldn't have been difficult to plant the clues, and once your father discovered them, he'd rally his troops to your rescue. Perhaps you are unaware of it, since your country has been blessed with peace

for some time now, but your father commands the strongest army in the world. A man would have to be a fool to challenge him."

"Gala, it sounds like Ashton just called himself a fool."

"An accurate assessment, I'd say."

"Ha ha, you're so very clever," said Ashton. "Do you feel better now that you've got that barb in?"

"Much," answered Aylan haughtily.

"Good. Now once your father was on the move, *my* father would jump to his aid, offering access to our lands and our intelligence —

"Both of which it seems you're in short supply of."

"Seriously, are you done? You're awfully cheeky for a prisoner; I may have to find a way to instill more fear in you. Now, in return for our assistance, we'd ask just one small favor: If we managed to get you home safely, which we would since you'd be hidden away with me the whole time, all we would ask is that the conquered Southerners be brought back under our rule, thus restoring my country to its former grandeur. And, *voila*!"

"That has got to be the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

"You're right. Way too much effort when I could just marry you instead. There's no way daddy won't help his daughter's husband win a war. Call it a wedding present if you will. With his help, it'll be over a week after it begins. Quick and easy."

"But again, *why* would I ever consent to marry you in the first place?"

"For my masculine good looks, my quick wit, and my clever mind, naturally. Not to mention, you'll be queen of a very powerful country."

"And if those are not enough?"

"Well, if those are not enough, then you'll agree in order to prevent me from killing your friend here and proceeding with plan A."

Aylan looked quickly at Gala, whose terrified expression told her that the prince wasn't bluffing. She glared at him, furious at being trapped in every conceivable way.

"Why didn't you consider plan B in the first place? You could have made this all so much more pleasant."

"My dear, my country was ripped in two because my grandfather rightly believed a servant girl wasn't fit to be queen. Not *that* much has changed. However, you aren't quite as bad as I expected. I assumed you'd be somewhat…dirtier, perhaps? But instead you're actually quite beautiful, and I rather like that sharp tongue of yours. You seem, I don't know… challenging. My country has been split long enough. I am willing to drop my pride to make her whole again."

Aylan felt tears beginning to well up in her eyes as every trace of defiance left her. "You said we had a common enemy," she whispered, suddenly fearing his answer. "Who did you mean?"

"Ah, but that is the icing on the cake for you! Garrick? The man who wouldn't have you? I am giving you the chance to punish him for it. For you see, the country to the south of mine… is his."

Chapter Seventeen

"Wherever you are, I'll find you," thought Garrick, as he hurried through the marketplace, his eyes trained on the wide straightaway in the distance leading up into the village. So focused was he on that goal, he didn't see the man crouched down on the cobbles in front of him until it was too late. His shins crashed into the man's side while his upper half was propelled forward, and he slammed into the unyielding earth with a painful thud.

"What the *devil* do you mean, running into me like that?" screamed the man as Garrick tried to untangle his limbs. "I should have you arrested for assault! Is it so difficult to keep your eyes *open* while running down a busy street? Are you really so stupid that you can't manage something as simple as that?"

Garrick stood and brushed himself off, ignoring the vitriol. He knew that if he waited for the man to calm down and take in his noble air and expensive clothing, the tirade would likely halt

with some dispatch. His assumption proved correct. The man spluttered incoherently and began to frantically backpedal.

"Forgive me sir, for putting myself in your way in such foolish manner! I only meant to pick up these bundles I dropped; I should have been paying more attention. I do hope you're ok — would you like to step into my store and sit for a moment? I'm sure my wife would have some refreshment to offer you. Perhaps some tea?"

Garrick silenced the man with a wave of his hand. "What is your name?" he asked.

"I am Nicolas Wicken, sir, merchant of luxury textiles from around the world. If I may say, you look like a man of impeccable taste; perhaps you would like to see some of the cloth I have? I will give you an excellent price."

"No, thank you," said Garrick. "But hopefully you can help me in another way. I am searching for two of my companions. They seem to have wandered off while shopping, and as your store is just the sort they might like, perhaps you've seen them?"

"Ah, you flatter me! Tell me what your companions look like, and I will do my best to assist you."

"They are two maidens, one fair-haired and dressed in pink, the other dark-haired and in blue. Both are lovely, the former particularly so. She was wearing a large sapphire in her hair at the nape of her neck, and the ugliest pair of shoes you ever saw on her feet. You could not mistake them if you've seen them."

"Of course! I know just the two you mean, for they were in my shop earlier. The blonde maiden meant to return and purchase this fabric," he said, holding out the bundle of blue silk he'd so recently gathered up from the street. "She wanted it to wear to a ball, but she said she needed to retrieve more gold before she could

buy it, as she only had a little bit left. 'Aylan' I believe her name was; I did not forget it because that is our princess's name as well. A beautiful name, don't you think?"

"Quite beautiful," said Garrick. "And the fabric is beautiful too. How much for all of it?"

"Well, sir, you must understand — this fabric was recovered from a sealed chest found in the deepest part of the jungle of Keirpali. It is believed to have been meant to make up the wedding dress of the Empress Sehra, who disappeared there nearly two hundred years ago —"

"That should cover it," interrupted Garrick, throwing down a small sack of gold coins and tucking the bundle of silk into his satchel, "although I think you're a terrible liar. Now, please tell me which way they went, I have no more time to waste."

"Of course," said the merchant bowing deep to hide his glee at having been paid two princely sums for the same bolt of cloth. "They went out into the lane there and were about to cross the street, when something alarmed the dark-haired girl and she began shouting at the other to run. They both took off toward the village, and caused quite a commotion while they were at it. I've never seen two girls who could run like that, and good gracious how the brunette could jump! It was almost as if she were trying to fly."

The words had barely escaped the merchant's lips before Garrick was off again, not bothering to check his speed as he tore up the road toward the village.

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"Well my dear, have you made a decision?" asked Ashton, "or shall I persuade you further?" He drew a short blade from his boot and set it meaningfully on the table in front of Gala. Aylan eyed it desperately.

"You must understand, this is not the proposal I had imagined as a little girl," she stammered, stalling.

"Ha! I'm sure it's not. As a princess, sort of, I suppose you do deserve a bit better. Hold on, I have something." He turned from her and strode across the room to a sideboard where a leather satchel was hanging, and began rummaging through it. "Don't even *think* of touching that knife," he called over his shoulder. "You aren't fast enough to free yourselves and be out of the house before I could catch you again, and if I am forced to tie you down a second time, you can be sure I'll be much heavier with your bindings."

Aylan's hand, which was suspended over the blade, snapped back into her lap, and she heard him chuckle softly. After a few moments he found what he was looking for, and then surprised both girls by doing the unthinkable: He returned, and dropped to one knee in front of Aylan, taking her hand in his.

"Aylan," he said, caressing her fingers with his thumb, "would you do me the honor of marrying me?"

"I —"

"Please, try to be quiet for just a minute, if you could," he said, putting a finger to her lips. "I'm not done. I know this is not the proposal you've always wanted, and this is certainly not the kind of proposal I ever expected to offer a woman… and even in my wildest dreams I never thought that woman would be *you*. However, we're both at this moment, and we're in it together. I don't love you, I will probably never love you, but I cannot say I

wouldn't be eternally grateful if you help me fulfill a dream I've been carrying my entire life. Do this, and I'll be proud to call you my wife, for you'd have earned your place as queen of my country. That's more than many couples have… can that not be enough?"

Aylan's breathing came in shallow gasps as adrenaline shot through her veins. "You're asking me to help you start a war," she whispered.

"No. With your father behind me, the odds of it coming to that are next to nothing. The Southerners will surrender before it's barely begun.

"But Olivia is my friend," she pleaded, "and you want to steal her home."

"Gala is also your friend," Ashton answered, an edge returning to his voice. "She's seen my face and heard my plan. If you refuse me, she won't be allowed to leave this room alive. Which is worse? To lose one's home or to lose one's life?"

Aylan looked quietly at Gala, who'd grown deathly pale and wouldn't meet her gaze. Aylan knew every word Ashton said must be the truth. Beginning with the threat, and ending with the proposal, he'd meant every bit of it. With so much at stake, Gala would have sensed a bluff, surely.

"I suppose 'Aylan Kensington' does have a certain ring to it," Aylan whispered.

"Are you saying 'yes?'"

"To saving my friend… I'm saying yes."

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Garrick's eyes were locked onto the slope before him, his legs pumping efficiently to the rhythm of the words repeating over

and over in his mind: "Please don't let it be too late. Please don't let it be too late." He'd learned his lesson well enough in the market to remember to scan the ground in front of him, and that unexpected education soon bore fruit. A few yards ahead, he spotted a tiny brown lump in the road… one that struck him as oddly familiar. In seconds he reached it, and immediately recognized it as one of the clogs Aylan had been wearing earlier. No other woman would be caught dead in such ugly shoes, he was certain. Garrick picked it up, and tucked it into his satchel next to the bundle of silk. "If I find you, I'll have a gown made for you, and take you to that ball myself," he whispered.

He looked at the tidy house-fronts on either side of the street. Each had the same blue shutters on whitewashed walls, the same window boxes full of red flowers, the same well-kept walkways. Nothing anywhere suggested anything amiss.

"But she was here. The shoe proves she was here. Something made her lose it, and something — or someone — prevented her from coming back to get it."

Garrick shivered. It wasn't much to go on, but at least it was something. He strode to the nearest door, and began knocking.

Chapter Eighteen

"He's faster than I thought," murmured Ashton, glancing out the window and then drawing the shade. "That's alright, we'll be done here in just another minute, and then I'll send you on your way."

"Wait, what?" said Aylan, taken aback. "You're letting us go? Who's out there?"

"Your lover boy. Seems he cares enough to search for you after all. He's working his way from door to door on the other side of the street."

Aylan inhaled sharply. Garrick would get to their door eventually. Ashton might not answer his knock, but that wouldn't stop her from making as much noise as she possibly could.

"Don't get any ideas, Princess. I'll turn you out long before he gets to our door. And you'll tell him a very clever story about

how you ran into an old friend and decided to come over for tea. Or something."

Aylan smiled and nodded, not understanding her good fortune; she thought he'd meant to hold her captive until a minister could be found to marry them then and there. *No way I come back and marry you after we're free.*

"All that's left to do is sign the engagement contract. I'll be sure to keep it safe with me so it doesn't meet with any misfortune."

"Of course," answered Aylan sweetly. "Tell me where to sign."

He studied her. "You really think I'm stupid, don't you? You can put away your smile, darling. When you walk out that door, you'll be leaving more bound to me than if our engagement had been made before a dozen sovereigns… because we have the perfect witness, don't we?" Aylan's eyes snapped to Gala and then back to Ashton. "Oh yes," he said, "I know exactly what she is."

"No!" shrieked Gala. "No, I won't help you!"

Ashton shrugged. "Then you'll die in this room and we'll go back to plan A. Sad, I was really beginning to warm up to the idea of plan B. Oh well!"

He picked up the dagger, and placed the tip of it to the furiously pulsing vein in Gala's neck. Aylan looked on, horrified, as a trembling Gala closed her eyes.

"No!" she screamed. "No, stop! She'll sign whatever she has to. Just give us the contract, we'll both sign."

"Aylan, I can't. You don't understand. I'd be like… like a slave to him."

"Only in this. And only if I refuse him later. If I marry him willingly, nothing will change for you."

"That's the beauty of fairies, isn't it?" asked Ashton with a chuckle. "I'm really beginning to think this whole day was truly fated. Most people think *her* kind are extinct. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the way she flew you over that carriage, but that's when I knew. It really makes Plan B nearly flawless, does it not? Now sign here."

Aylan felt utterly defeated as Ashton slid a sheet of paper in front of her. In a surprisingly fine hand he'd written:

> 'I, *Ashton William Kensington*, do hereby enter into this engagement with *Aylan Avery Juliet Charming*, and promise to wed her after such sufficient time that appropriate preparations can be made. I acknowledge that this engagement is as binding as marriage itself, and will uphold the sanctity and honor of the promise made herein.
>
> I, *Aylan Avery Juliet Charming*, do hereby enter into this engagement with *Ashton William Kensington*, and promise to wed him after such sufficient time that appropriate preparations can be made. I acknowledge that this engagement is as binding as marriage itself, and will uphold the sanctity and honor of the promise made herein.
>
> Signed this day by
>
> _____
>
> Ashton William Kensington
>
> _____
>
> Aylan Avery Juliet Charming

And then, below, the paragraph that transformed the contract from merely binding to iron-clad:

> I, *Gala Rose Langdon,* bear witness to this contract and the promise made herein. I acknowledge that this pledge of engagement is mutually binding to those entering into it, and promise to do all that is within my power to bring that pledge to bear.
>
> Witnessed this day by
>
> _____
>
> Gala Rose Langdon

Aylan's hand was remarkably steady as she signed, but she trembled as she watched Gala do the same. Her friend's eyes blazed a fiery gold as she inscribed her name.

It was done.

"And now, this is for you," said Ashton, folding the contract and producing a gold ring. It's been passed down to every first-born son in my family who would become king. You'll note the inscription."

"*My country, my heart*," read Aylan. "Keep it. There's no way this will fit me."

"No. You deserve it. You'll wear it on a chain around your neck," answered Ashton.

"How appropriate."

"Indeed. I'll send a proper ring after I've had a chance to ask your father for your hand. Then you can give that one back."

"He could refuse, you know. My father? He could refuse his permission."

"If he refuses, I'm sure Gala won't mind helping you arrange our elopement. In fact, I believe she'll insist on it. Won't you?"

"No," murmured Gala, in a breathy whisper.

"What was that?"

Suddenly a dull golden glow began rising in Gala's eyes, and she coughed violently, clawing at her throat as if she were choking. "Yes," she croaked, gasping for breath. "I meant yes!" The glow was instantly extinguished, and Gala inhaled once, deeply, before bursting into tears.

"Fairies!" cried Ashton, shaking his head and throwing his hands up with delight. "It really is such a shame your kind were killed off; you're such handy things to have around."

"You're a monster," hissed Aylan.

"And you're as good as my wife. Care to kiss me before you go?"

"No."

"We'll save it for the wedding then. Just be sure to not kiss anyone else in the meantime. You belong to me now, and I don't like to share." He bent down, and with two quick slashes of his knife, freed the princesses of their bindings. "Off with you now, Prince Garrick is almost here."

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"Garrick! Garrick, we're here."

The sound of her voice nearly took his breath away. He turned around and relief washed over him as he saw her standing on the other side of the lane, safe and unharmed.

"Aylan!" he cried, striding toward them. "Gala! Where have you two been? We've been searching everywhere for you. I — I mean, your brother — he's so worried about you."

"We ran into a friend," answered Aylan. "An old friend. She invited us to tea, and we must have lost track of the time. I'm so sorry, we never meant to make you worry."

"You lost track of the time?" He wanted to laugh, he wanted to shake her, but most of all he wanted to hug her. And suddenly, he couldn't help himself. He grasped her shoulders and pulled her into his arms, ignoring her gasp. "Aylan," he said, his lips against her hair, "you have no idea — *no idea* — what you've put me through in the past three hours."

"You? I thought Liam was the one who was worried."

"He is. We all were. Even the dung-shoveler."

Aylan smacked his chest, and he took her hand and kissed it. "I'm sorry for our quarrel," he said. "The things I said were stupid, but truly, I didn't mean to offend you."

"I'm sorry too," she answered. "I may have been just a little defensive and, umm, overly-sensitive."

It was the understatement of the year, but he decided to let it pass. "I have something for you." He dropped to his knees and began digging through his satchel. His fingers grazed the blue silk, but he decided to save it. Instead, he pulled out Aylan's clog and presented it to her as if it were an emerald for an empress. Aylan blushed all the way to the roots of her hair, and Garrick grinned. "Don't be embarrassed, these shoes are lovely," he teased.

"Actually, I think if you bury this in some dirt and throw some water on it, it might actually sprout a shoe-tree."

She cuffed him gently on the side of his head and he resisted the urge to kiss her hand again.

"They're not that bad!"

"Aylan, I generally leave the fashion opinions to my sister, but even I know that these are probably the single ugliest pair of shoes to have ever been produced. Where did you even get them?"

"My godmother gave them to me."

"Well I'm not sure your godmother likes you very much. I think you'd be better off barefoot. Seriously, I could just carry you back to the ship."

Aylan laughed. "Who says chivalry is dead?"

He winked and gestured to her foot. "May I?" he asked.

She nodded and he took her ankle in his hand. "Your foot is like a child's," he murmured, studying it and grazing along her toes with his thumb. "It's incredible that you manage to walk gracefully on these little things at all, and not like a drunken sailor."

"Or like your sister on Liam's ship."

"That too," he said, looking up at her with a grin. He found her staring back at him, her blue eyes full of some unnamed emotion. From his vantage point on the ground, he was struck by the memory of gazing up at her as she rode by in her carriage on that day two weeks ago. It was a memory he'd tried unsuccessfully to ignore practically every moment since, but now he let it wash over him. "Why am I so drawn to you?" he wondered. "Why can't you be a peasant girl that I could easily ignore, or a true princess that I could pursue? Why do you have to be stuck so maddeningly in the middle?"

"Maybe you're the one who's stuck, did you ever think of that?"

Garrick's head whipped around to where Gala stood. "*What* did you say?" he demanded.

"Oh, er, I said, umm, 'My goodness, what a duck! Did you ever see one so fat?' Why? What did you think I said?"

"Not that," he answered, glancing uncertainly at the anemic-looking goose she'd gestured toward in the yard of a nearby house.

"Actually, now that I'm seeing it from this angle, it's really rather skinny isn't it? My mistake."

"It's also not a duck."

"Yes well. You say potato, I say tomato right?"

"Umm, that's not exactly — "

"Garrick, for goodness sake! Are you just going to let Aylan stand there on one foot while we argue about vegetables? Get on with it!"

"Right." He turned back to Aylan, and gently slipped the shoe onto her outstretched foot, adjusting it so that it was snuggly in place. He was just about to let go of her ankle, when something unusual caught his eye. At first glance it had been indiscernible against her tanned skin, but on closer inspection was clear: a reddish line of raw skin just above her ankle, the sort that a rope might make when bound too tightly against the flesh, and behind that the purplish shadow of what looked like the beginning of an impressive bruise.

"Aylan, how did you say you lost your shoe again?"

"Oh, I, uh — there was a carriage. I wasn't paying attention. Gala pulled me out of the way."

"And then she tripped and scraped her ankle on the curb," added Gala, in a voice that seemed oddly hollow. "It's nothing for you to worry about."

It was likely nothing more than the setting sun, but in that moment Gala's eyes seemed to Garrick to have an unearthly golden glow. Garrick squinted at her and then shook his head and dropped Aylan's foot. "Well," he said, "it's getting late. We'd better get going if we're going to get the two of you back to school before dark."

Chapter Nineteen

Aylan wandered woodenly through the rest of her day, offering cursory answers to questions that seemed never-ending, until it was finally time for bed. She didn't even want to talk to Gala about all that had happened, and was grateful that her friend's gift for detecting the obvious was even more finely honed than her ability to see what was hidden. She sat on her bed, waiting for the sound of the door on Gala's side of the bathroom to shut, and for the silence that would follow. When it finally came, she stood up, not bothering to pause for the sound of the latch. Gala was a good friend; she wouldn't lock her door if there were any chance Aylan might need her during the night.

In the bathroom she poured cold water from the porcelain pitcher that Emmie filled for them each night into the marble basin in front of the mirror. Henriette's words whispered in her ear, comforting and familiar. *Scrub your face until it's rosy every night and*

every morning, and it will never grow old. Brush your hair one hundred strokes to make it shine. Put lemon cream on your hands to make them soft, and you'll never need rings to make them beautiful. Aylan clutched what was still familiar in a world that had been so suddenly upended. Her eyes met the ones gazing back at her from the mirror, and she burst into tears.

Just as she felt she would be totally overtaken by despair, her eyes focused on something in the mirror, just past her shoulder. She'd left the door to her bedroom open, so the room behind her was laid out in the reflection, and there on her bed sat the leather-bound book of stories. It hadn't been there before.

"Godmother, please," she cried. "Please, are you here?"

Silence.

Aylan whirled around and charged into the room. She grabbed the book with both hands, and with every ounce of her strength hurled it against the paneled wall of her bedroom.

"How dare you leave me alone with these stories?" she screamed. "I don't care what's written in that book, there's nothing more I wish to know!"

In that moment, she hated the book, hated every page of it. Her life had been one continuous happy dream until she'd opened its cover and read those first pages; now the life she'd known was gone forever, and there was nothing a stupid book could do to help her. She strode to where it lay, and this time hurled the book into the fire. There was a brilliant explosion of sparks as it struck the crumbling logs, and a bright flash of light. She watched the flames flare around it for a moment, and then turned toward her wardrobe, eager to put on her nightgown and sit in bed while she watched the book burn down to the very last ember.

Alas, though she took her time digging out her most comfortable cotton nightdress, and spent another several minutes slowly counting out one hundred strokes of the brush through her hair, the book wasn't even slightly singed by the time she returned to the hearth. Not a blackened corner nor curled-up page announced that it was anywhere near a fire, though the flames consumed it, licking happily at its leather binding.

"Why won't you burn?" she cried. "Please, I don't want to know anything else!" She crumpled to the floor, and sobbed until she was so exhausted, she fell asleep there on the hearth.

.....

In another house, in front of another fireplace, Garrick sat staring into a slowly dying bed of embers. He glanced at the clock on the mantle; it was ten minutes until midnight.

"There's still time to change your mind," he said to himself. "Lock the window now, and when midnight strikes, it'll be too late." He knew he should, and he knew he wouldn't — just like he hadn't on any of the other nights since the day Aylan rode by in her carriage. "This is getting pathetic, you know. Every night for two weeks? And what if Livy sees you?"

He shook his head. *That* was impossible. Olivia was vigilant about locking her door and closing her drapes, so that no one could accidentally discover the form she took at midnight. There was no way she'd be out wandering the halls of The Royal School after dark.

Garrick thought back to the day their mother had finally explained to the twins that it wasn't actually normal to become something different at night than they were in the day. When they

learned they were cursed — and why — the truth had struck Olivia far more profoundly than him. From that moment on, every step she took was in a direction she believed would free her of what they'd inherited. She threw herself into her studies of music and dance, perfected her conversation, and jealously nurtured her blossoming beauty. Any weapon she might possess with which to capture a man, she honed to a sharp, fine point.

It was different for Garrick. He never completely bought into Olivia's theory about how to break the curse, and he didn't honestly care enough about breaking it in the first place to think too hard about why. But he loved his sister, and if it was true — as their mother said — that the family across the sea was the reason for all of her unhappiness, then he could do nothing but despise them. And the fact that King Charming had once broken his mother's heart to marry a peasant made his loathing that much deeper.

"You can't honestly say you despise her, though," he murmured. "Not anymore…"

Midnight.

Garrick's back began to hunch forward just as the clock on the mantle began to chime. Suddenly his hips could no longer bear the weight of his upright form and he found his body racing toward the floor. He put out his hands to catch himself, but by then they were no longer hands. He took a moment to adjust to his new body, and then sprang out the window and was gone into the night.

.....

"Good lord child, what in the world are you doing on the floor!" cried Emmie at seven-thirty the following morning. Aylan

shot up and looked around with bloodshot eyes. For a moment she remembered none of the details of the previous day, or even where she was. Her head was pounding and her whole body felt stiff.

"Gracious, you look terrible! Get in bed, there will be nothing but rest and warm compresses for you today."

Emmie helped Aylan to her feet, and guided her toward the bed. She pulled up the covers and tucked Aylan in, fussing over her and fluffing her pillows. For a moment, Aylan felt like she was home again in Henriette's care, and she burrowed into the downy softness.

"There now, that's a good girl. You stay there while I get the fire going again; it's freezing in here! Then I'll call down for some poppy tea to help you sleep. You really look awful. I mean, you look *really* bad. I hope poor Gala hasn't caught whatever you have. Perhaps I should check on her first. You stay right there, I'll be back."

It took a moment for the critical words to register, but when they did, Aylan sat up once more. *The fire.* The fire had been reduced to a bed of charcoal and cinders, and from the palpable chill in the air, it had been so for some time. She raced over to the hearth, her eyes digging through the soot before her hands were close enough to do the same. The book was gone. It had burned down into a pile of ash.

"Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you, thank you." It was small consolation now that the memories of all that had passed were flooding her mind, but it was consolation nonetheless.

"Well, Gala seems fine. It took her forever to answer the door, so she must have slept soundly last ni — WHAT ARE YOU DOING OUT OF BED? Goodness child, you're covered in soot!

What are you doing? I think I should call for a physician, you must have a fever — "

"No, it's ok. I don't need a doctor. I'm missing an earring, and thought it might have come undone while I slept last night. But it doesn't seem to be here. I just need to wash up and then I'll gladly go back to bed."

.....

Aylan woke several hours later with a decidedly stiff neck. She moved her head from side to side as consciousness returned to her by degrees, only to realize her head — which had been resting on a feather pillow when she'd fallen asleep — was now propped at an uncomfortable angle against something hard. Suddenly wide awake, she sat up and turned to see what had woken her. He heart dropped.

The book of stories had returned.

"Well you look annoyingly well rested," she said, as she eyed the shimmering gold crest on the book's perfectly intact, soot-free cover. The book didn't answer, but instead flew open. Aylan pulled it onto her lap and looked down at the page before her. "*The Story of Why the Beauty Slept*," she recited. "I suppose you want me to read this. Well guess what? I'm not going to." She tried to slam the book shut, only to find that it had become impossible to close. Not only that, it also seemed quite fixed upon her lap; she couldn't move it off of her at all.

"I really, *really* dislike you," she said. She knew that at some point Emmie would be back to check on her, and being held hostage in bed by a magical book seemed like a really difficult

situation to explain. "Fine," she muttered, feeling defeated. "I'll read your stupid story."

The book graciously allowed her to shift into a more comfortable position, and she began:

> *Once upon a time, there was a king who was never meant to be a king, and he ruled over a piece of land that was never meant to be a country at all. Perhaps to some this would seem a marvelous circumstance — to have come by a country when you ought to have had none — however the young king was despondent. For, although his subjects did not know it, the king had paid a high price for his palace. He'd traded the love of a beautiful woman for his beautiful crown, and discovered that where she was warm and smiling, the crown was nothing but a cold weight bearing down on his head.*

"This must be about Ashton's family," said Aylan. "The king sounds like the younger of the twins. The one who gained a country — or half a country, at least — but lost the girl he loved." Already more curious than she cared to admit, she continued reading.

> *Shortly after this king took the throne, his father passed away. The king's heart was already so heavy with grief, that even such a loss could not deepen his sadness. Instead, it gave him a glimmer of hope. "Perhaps," thought he, "my way is cleared to have everything in this life that I desire. For it was only the trickery of my father that caused me to deny my true love, and now my father is gone."*

The king did not acknowledge that his pride had been his real downfall, nor would he accept his heart when it told him that if only he had loved her as she deserved, his mind could never have wavered. Instead, he sprang into action. His country was bordered by a wide expanse of sea, and boasted some of the finest ports in the world. He ordered that the four best captains in his country be put aboard the four fastest ships, and sent one in each of the four directions of the wind to seek the girl he'd lost. It didn't occur to him until a full year later, when all the ships returned without her, that she wouldn't allow herself to be found as long as his pride allowed others to seek her, while he sat on his throne and waited.

Eventually this young king, resigned that his love was truly lost, did his duty and married, though he only had a small piece of his heart left to give. His wife did her duty as well and gave him a son, and for a while there were shadows of happiness.

Time passed, and the king became old while his son became a man. The young prince took a wife, and she too gave him a child — a beautiful little princess.

Now, it was and is customary that when a royal babe is born, everyone who looks upon it ought to say how beautiful, how bright, how utterly perfect and superior the child is, even if it is born colicky, and ugly as a potato. In rare instances, however, all the praise and more is deserved, and the old king's granddaughter was just such a child. Her skin was the color of a rose peeking up through a snowdrift, and her curls were of a glowing auburn. Her tiny smile — which was always on display, for she never cried — had the

upward tilt of a dove's wings, and above that her eyes shown like two twin pieces borrowed from a brilliant summer sky.

When the old king looked for the first time upon that perfect little face he felt his heart suddenly begin to thaw, and when she reached up to grasp his finger in her tiny hand, it melted altogether. From that moment on, his entire life was devoted to her happiness. She had the finest toys, the most beautiful dresses, all the best that his vast fortune could buy her. In the years before her mother would allow her to have a pony, the king would often make an un-regal spectacle of himself by prancing around on his hands and knees while she clutched his hair with her chubby fist. When she turned five, he could refuse her no longer, and bought her a beautiful chestnut pony and taught her to ride. The two were inseparable, right up until the day the girl turned sixteen, which was the same day her grandfather ran out of excuses why her education abroad ought to be indefinitely postponed.

He pouted as her trunks were packed, but nonetheless made sure they were packed with only the very finest things, and when the time came for her departure, he left his throne for the first time in all his long rule, and escorted her across the sea himself.

They arrived at the school, which for hundreds of years had taught princesses to be queens, and the girl's sweet nature and charming smile made her an instant success. At the welcome breakfast, sovereigns clamored to get a look at her to see if rumors of her beauty were true, and other princesses shrewdly smiled and complemented her dress, eager to be in the good graces of the obvious favorite. Everything seemed to be going perfectly until, suddenly, everything changed.

The king's eyes had been scanning the room, taking in the number of his peers who'd been utterly enchanted with his granddaughter, when suddenly they set upon another pair of eyes, which had been quietly observing him from across the room. He wasn't sure how long she'd been watching, though her composure suggested that she was not feeling the same pangs of shock that were tearing at his own heart.

Her face had barely changed. There was a softness about her cheeks and eyes that had not been so noticeable before, and her hair had darkened a bit from the sun-kissed gold of her youth. Despite the small alterations, she was still lovelier than sunshine, and it made the weight of his crown and his many years without her all the heavier.

It took him a moment to realize he was moving, walking toward her as if toward an irresistible force. He saw her eyes widen with surprise at his progress, so he knew that she had not bewitched him to make him step forward…at least, she had not done so on purpose. He stopped just in front of her, nearly close enough to embrace her, had he had the nerve. After a moment of searching her face, he said the one word that was filling his mind:

"Aylan."

She inhaled sharply, and then sank into a curtsey.

"Your Majesty."

Her greeting stung like a slap to the face.

"Please don't call me that."

"To call you anything else would be an impertinence."

"To call me anything else would be merciful, and show how infinitely more kind you are than I. Call me a dog,

or a beast; call me any name you can think of, but please, don't call me that."

After a moment of silence, the hard defiance of her expression softened and a small smile played on the corners of her lips.

"Garrick, then, if you prefer."

"That's not so sweet as what you once called me, but at least it doesn't cut me to hear."

She smiled fully at that, and let him kiss her hand when he reached for it.

"I looked for you," he whispered into her palm.

"You didn't," she whispered back, withdrawing it from his grasp.

"I swear I —

"No. You let others look for me, and I choose not to be found."

"But why? We could have had everything we've ever wanted!" he said, anger creeping into his voice. "We could have been married as we planned, you could have been queen."

"I never wanted to be queen."

"But we'd have been together! It wouldn't have mattered!"

"So you say that the title wouldn't have mattered, if we'd only been together?"

"Well of course it wouldn't have mattered!" he bellowed.

Though his voice ought to have carried over at least half the room, not a single face turned to wonder at it. Even

in his agitated state, a portion of his mind marveled at her sorcery. She was a powerful witch indeed.

"If the title would not have mattered," she retorted coolly, "then perhaps you should not have chosen it in the first place. Go back to your granddaughter; she's looking for you. It was good to see that you're well."

She turned to leave, but he grabbed her wrist, pulling her to a halt. "Anything," he pleaded. "Name it, and I will do anything. I know you have the magic to take us back to that day. Let me choose again. Let me make the right choice this time. I swear I will make the right choice if you only give us another chance."

"Garrick, think of what you're asking," she said, with a sad smile and a gesture toward his granddaughter. "She'd never have lived."

"Then I'd never have loved her. But there is no version of my life in which I wouldn't love you. The first memory I have is of your face."

Aylan's resolve wavered under the imploring sincerity in his eyes, her uncertainty just discernible enough that he felt emboldened to pull her into his arms and bestow upon her a kiss such that neither had experienced since they were little more than children. In that moment, Aylan caught a flash of what the future might hold, and, smiling against his lips, she softened into his embrace.

When they finally parted, the King felt such a surge of triumph that he half expected to be eighteen again and back in his father's throne room when he opened his eyes. Instead, he found that they were still in the bustling hall,

protected by whatever spell she'd cast to make sure the moment they shared was theirs alone.

"Do I have time?" he murmured.

"For what?"

"To see her one more time. To say goodbye."

"My darling," she answered, "there is no need to say goodbye. She is part of our story now. You have plenty of time."

"But we — there will be another chance for us, won't there?"

"Yes, there will be a second chance… for what we might have had."

Through a haze of joy, his mind grasped an oddity in her words, and a sadness in her tone, but before he could question her she kissed him again, temporarily erasing any thought or uncertainty, and in another moment she was gone. Only her light scent in the air hinted that she'd been there at all.

The old King never saw her again.

The witch Aylan did not cast an enchantment that day, for in her glimpse of what could be, she saw there was no need. Already the threads of history were weaving their way into the fabric of the present and future, and it was a cloth more broad than any her magic could encompass.

The choice between pride and love would indeed be made again, and though she couldn't know the outcome, she knew at least one heart would be broken along the way. That thought gave her pain, but she would not intervene. Garrick would indeed get his wish for another

chance, though not in a way he could ever have imagined, and with consequences he might never have wanted.

Before she left, Aylan appeared to his granddaughter and offered her a gift: a small golden spindle. Attached was a note bidding the girl keep the treasure safe and hidden until the day might come when she would need it. "A year's rest is all I can offer you. You've been drawn into a story not of your making, and for that I am sorry."

The girl blinked in disbelief as the strange woman before her disappeared, and when her eyes opened again, their clear summer blue had been replaced with a stunning emerald green.

In the years that followed, the princess's popularity blossomed almost as quickly and fully as her beauty. Sovereigns the world over bargained to secure her as a bride for their sons, and during her eighteenth year a deal was finally struck, and the girl found herself engaged to a man whom she had never met. That unfamiliarity would prove short-lived, for the prince she was to marry was heir to the country in which she was completing her education, and a golden carriage was dispatched to bring her to meet him in the same hour she learned of her engagement.

She saw him waiting at the castle steps as her carriage approached, and felt her heart flutter at his boyish grin. He bounded down the stairs and pulled open her door to hand her down himself. "Forgive me," he said with a smile, "but I was just so very excited to meet you."

He presented her with an emerald ring, inscribed with the words, 'Here is my heart, which I entrust to your

hand. Keep it well.' The princess promised she would never take it off.

For two years the pair continued in this way. The princess visited the castle that would one day be her home as often as she was able, and the prince returned each of her visits in kind. With each successive meeting, the princess found herself more deeply in love with the charming prince who would be her husband. Life felt like a fairytale until the day her education came to an end and she was to depart for her own country one final time before her marriage. She waved to her fiancé from the deck of the ship that was to bring her home with a heavy heart, and a wish that the final year of their engagement might pass quickly.

Every day of their separation, the princess wrote her prince a letter, and just as with her visits, he returned each of her letters in kind.

Until a day came that brought no letter.

That day was followed by another, and then a third. For ten whole days she faithfully posted her notes, but received none in return. Finally, on the eleventh day, a messenger did come, but the envelope in his hand bore a script she did not recognize. The princess tore it open, reading hungrily, and then sank to the floor.

He was married.

Their letters often took two weeks to make the journey over the sea, which meant that a fortnight had passed since the letter had been sent, and it was ten days before that that he'd written his last note. She knew its contents by heart, for she'd read it daily ever since. He was going to a ball that night in

honor of his father. "I wish more than anything that you could be with me tonight," he written, and she'd wished it too.

Twenty-four days.

It had been twenty-four days since he'd stopped loving her… if he'd ever loved her at all.

Never in her life had the princess experienced loss or grief, nor had she ever been denied anything her heart desired. That her first experience with pain should be one of such magnitude crushed her spirit, which was so wholly unequipped to bear the blow. She removed the emerald ring, which had been so dear to her for so long, and bid her messenger take it back to the prince. With it she wrote on a slip of parchment: "Here is your heart, which was never mine to begin with. I do not expect to receive mine back in return, for I gave it away completely."

The End

"The *end*? How can that possibly be the end?" cried Aylan, angrily wiping aside the tears that were streaking down her face.

"Well my dear, you already know how it turns out, so it really didn't seem necessary to go on."

Aylan shrieked at the unexpected voice, and the startled leap that accompanied her shriek sent her tumbling off the edge of the bed and into a splayed heap on the floor.

"Godmother, what the *hell*."

"My goodness, Aylan, is that any way to greet your beloved Godmother? And such language!"

Aylan folded her arms and harrumphed in a very unladylike way.

"Come now, get up off the floor."

"Godmother, what did you mean when you said I already know how the story ends?" asked Aylan, not moving from her spot on the rug. "It ended the same way the first one did, but that tells me nothing at all. Why did the beauty sleep? I still don't know."

"But you do. Can you not recall the fairytale of the 'Sleeping Beauty?'"

"Yes, but it doesn't go anything like what I just read."

"Old King Garrick's granddaughter was the most stunningly beautiful woman in the world at the time, and when she got her heart broken —"

"By my father?"

"Yes, by your father."

"And the witch Aylan knew it would happen."

"Yes, she knew. That's why she gave the princess —"

"Olivia and Garrick's mother."

"Yes. That's why she gave Olivia and Garrick's mother the golden spindle. It was, as she said, a year's worth of respite. The beautiful princess pricked her finger on it and fell into a deep sleep for one year."

"But in the story, the sleeping princess wakes when she's kissed by her true love. My father was happily married to someone else… so that can't possibly have happened."

"Well no, dear, that didn't happen. Her story only inspired the tale as you know it. Rumors were circulated that she'd been cursed by a witch and made to prick her finger… and in a way that's true."

"So what really happened to her?"

"Well, she woke up after a year, and stretched a bit. During that time her grandfather, whose heart had also been broken,

passed away, and for a time she mourned him. But she never pricked her finger again. Eventually she married, and had children — twins, as you know. Runs in their family. The boy she named in honor of her beloved grandfather."

"Garrick," Aylan whispered. "She named him Garrick. And the witch said there would be another chance…"

Her Godmother watched as an idea began to blossom in Aylan's mind.

"Godmother, what happened to the witch? I can't think of any tale that might be tied to her."

"The witch Aylan also had a granddaughter. She wasn't born a princess, but like King Garrick's granddaughter, she married a prince and become a mother. And she, too, named her daughter for a beloved grandparent."

Aylan drew in a sharp breath. "Her grandmother's name was Aylan."

"Your great-grandmother, yes."

"But then… how can this tale ever have a happy ending?"

"That, my love, is up to you."

And then as quickly as she had appeared, her Godmother was gone.

Chapter Twenty

"So wait, let me see if I have this straight. Your godmother is a fairy and she gave you an enchanted storybook, and the book has been telling you stories about your past—"

"Well not *my* past."

"Right, right, *the* past."

"Yes."

"And based on these stories, you believe your great-grandmother was the witch who forced Ashton's country to be split?"

"Correct."

"It's too bad you didn't find that out sooner. I can't imagine Ashton would've deigned to marry the great-granddaughter of the woman who deprived him of his full birth-right. Maybe we should tell him."

As soon as she spoke the words, Gala's eyes flashed an angry gold, and Aylan did her best to tamp down the feeling of horror as she watched her friend struggle for breath. It was becoming a frequent occurrence in their conversation, and yet Gala kept insisting they continue.

"Gala," Aylan said yet again, "you don't have to keep talking with me about this, I understand. It was selfish to think I should even try talking to you."

"No. No! You're my best friend. I owe it to you to listen. I've missed you this past week."

"I'm sorry," said Aylan. "It's been a difficult week for me, but I didn't mean to shut you out. I was just so consumed with what I'd read… and then this came." She pulled a letter from her pocket and handed it to Gala. "It's from Ashton."

Her friend read aloud:

> *My dearest Aylan,*
>
> *By the time your beautiful eyes find their way to this letter, a similar one will have reached your father to formally request your hand in marriage. I know you must be bursting at the seams to share our good news with the world, but sadly, my darling, we we must wait a bit longer before we allow others to join in our happiness.*

"Can you believe his gall?" interrupted Aylan. "Calling me 'darling' and pretending we're happy? I want to punch him in the throat."

Gala raised an eyebrow, but continued without comment.

I've been thinking of the best way to go about announcing our engagement. Obviously our — shall we say non-traditional? — courtship prevented the usual bargaining and other formalities that accompany this sort of thing, so I took the liberty of writing to your father, telling him we met on the beach one morning after you'd snuck out of the castle. Naturally, we fell instantly in love. That has a nice sort of symmetry don't you think? After all, that's how your rebellious grandmother Rapunzel met your grandfather, and everyone knows your Daddy isn't one to put convention and propriety before true love. (It's doubtful he'd lock you in a tower either, though, given your smart mouth, I certainly might someday.)

Once we've secured your father's permission, we shall formally announce our engagement at the Winter Ball, and then be married in a year or two, on a date of your choosing. I see no reason why you should continue attending school during our engagement, but if you choose to, I insist that Gala remain your roommate for the duration. Otherwise, I shall petition your father to have you withdrawn so that you might continue your education in my country instead, where I can keep an eye on you.

Your devoted servant,
Ashton Kensington"

"Devoted servant, my ass."

"I don't know," said Gala. "Maybe he means it."

"You can not be serious."

"Well then maybe someday he'll mean it. You're fairly lovable after all. Maybe… maybe it'll all work out."

"I guess," said Aylan noncommittally.

"I'm sorry," said Gala. "It's just… I just want to believe you could find a way to be happy with Ashton. I'd feel a lot less guilty about my part in this if, you know…"

"If we magically fall in love?"

"That's pretty selfish of me, isn't it?"

"Gala, you can't possibly think I *blame* you for this?"

"How could you not?"

"It's not your fault Ashton is hell-bent on international domination. It's not your fault he figured out what you are. He was he one holding the knife to *your* throat, not the other way around."

"Ok," said Gala quietly.

"I mean it. And you'd know if I were lying, if I secretly did resent that magical-fairy-promise-keepy-thingy you do, and tried to hide it from you. So you have no choice but to believe me."

Gala smiled. "I guess. So, now that you're talking again, there's something I've been waiting to tell you."

"Oh? What is it? You could've told me before; you didn't have to wait for me to break loose of this depression I've been under."

"Well, I could tell you needed space, and I didn't know what you'd think…"

"What I'd think?" asked Aylan.

"It's about the ball. Liam wrote to me, and asked if he could be my date."

"My *brother* Liam?"

"Yes."

"My brother Liam has asked to *voluntarily* go to a ball?"

Gala grinned. "It appears he has."

"Well Olivia is certainly going to be annoyed. But why didn't you want to tell me? You did say yes, didn't you?"

"Of course I said yes, your brother is ridiculously good looking."

"Gross."

"I just didn't want to be so excited about something like the ball when you're obviously not."

"Oh for goodness sake! Just the idea of watching my brother attempt to dance is enough to make me excited. He has no idea how lucky he is to have asked the only girl whose toes are nearly impossible to step on. And besides, it's still a while between now and then; maybe my magic storybook will come up with some way for me to go to the ball with…"

"With Garrick? Is that what you were about to say? Garrick instead of Ashton, on the night you're supposed to announce your engagement?"

Aylan cringed as Gala's eyes once more became two glittering sheets of gold. "No, of course not. Of course that won't happen," she said soothingly. "It was a joke. You have nothing to worry about."

"But I do," answered Gala, her voice hollow. "Because based on those stories, it must have occurred to you that you and Garrick are meant to be together. Destined, even."

"No, that's ridiculous," Aylan lied. "I wouldn't let some old book tell me who I'm meant to be with. That's crazy!"

The gold in Gala's eyes brightened further still, and she looked at Aylan's forehead as if she were seeing inside it. "You think there's something between you and Garrick. Something that draws you to him. You felt it even before you read that story. That day in the carriage… you felt it then."

"Gala, stop. You're scaring me this time. I'm engaged to Ashton. I will marry Ashton. The book doesn't matter. Look." Aylan reached into her pocket and pulled out the other thing Ashton had sent: a ring. It featured an enormous yellow diamond, fully the size of Aylan's thumbnail, cradled in a halo of smaller diamonds and platinum. Aylan jammed it on her finger. "Look!"

The ring seemed to have an immediate effect on Gala. She stared at it for a long time, almost reverently, and then grinned widely and continued to stare.

"Well I'm glad you're so happy about this," muttered Aylan after several minutes. She wanted to mean everything she'd said about not blaming Gala for her situation, but she was struggling to contain a surge of intense indignation as she gazed at her friend's maniacal smile. Suddenly Gala began blinking furiously and shaking her head as if trying to clear it. Her smile melted away as her eyes travelled from Aylan's hand to her face, and the gold in her eyes slowly dimmed. At the same moment their natural warm-brown was fully restored, Gala burst into tears. "No," she said softly, "no, I am anything but happy about this."

Aylan watched helplessly as her friend fled the room.

.....

It didn't take long for the second letter to arrive. Aylan stepped into her bathroom to wash her face at the end of the day, and when she stepped out again, her bed had been turned down, and a neat white envelope sat propped on her pillow. Sighing, Aylan picked it up, and tugged it open. Her father got straight to the point:

We need to talk.

There will be a carriage waiting to pick you up first thing Sunday morning. You will come home for the week to celebrate your birthday. At least, that's what we're telling your mother. That's all she needs to know until we work this out.

Aylan exhaled slowly. She had a little less than a week to prepare herself to face her father. She knew that if she could convince him, somehow, that she was truly in love, he wouldn't question her… but that was a big 'if.'

"I can do it," she said, with more confidence than she felt. "I have to do it. For Gala."

She climbed in bed, determined to spend the last waking minutes of her day practicing what she'd say to her parents… but as always, the minute she closed her eyes, all her thoughts were of Garrick.

Chapter Twenty-One

"Livy, do you think it's time that I go home? You seem to have everything under control here; you don't need my help anymore."

"Don't be ridiculous," Olivia snapped. "I've gotten *nowhere* so far. This whole endeavor is an absolute disaster. Besides, you promised you'd stay until after the ball. I need you here at least until then."

Garrick leaned back heavily against the dune and stared out at the sea. He knew this conversation wasn't going to go well.

"What's wrong with you?" Olivia asked, eyeing him suspiciously. "This matters just as much to you as it does to me."

"Does it?" he answered quietly. "You know the curse has never bothered me the way it bothers you."

"So *you* like being a freak now? You like being a part-time human?"

"No, Livy, that's not what I said. Calm down."

"Garrick, I can't keep living this way. I'll go mad. We need to break this curse, and I can't do it without your help."

"How do we know that you marrying Liam will even work? What if it doesn't?"

"What is your problem?" Olivia hissed. "Why are you trying to give up on this now, when we could be so close?"

Garrick sighed and looked down at his hands. There was no sense hiding it from her anymore.

"She's all I can think about, Liv. I don't know why or how or even when it happened, but somehow she's gotten under my skin."

Olivia closed her eyes, and inhaled deeply. "Tell me… *tell me* you are not talking about Aylan."

"Livy — "

"*Tell me you are not talking about Aylan Charming.*"

Garrick stared at his sister. It was amazing how absolutely feline she could look when she was angry. "There's just something about her," he answered. "I don't know what it is. When I'm near her I feel so drawn to her, and when I'm not… I can't stand it. I can't stand not to be near her."

"For goodness sake, Garrick, you've been near her *once*. That's hardly enough—"

"It's been more than once, Liv."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "The first morning when you saw her from across a crowded room, and then that ridiculous display during our carriage ride — neither qualify as interaction."

"Those aren't the times I meant."

The color suddenly left Olivia's face as she realized the meaning of his words. "Then tell me," she said dangerously, "what *did* you mean?"

"Well sometimes, uh, you know, after midnight..." His words trailed off at the horror on Olivia's face.

"Garrick, you will ruin us," she whispered. "If anyone found out, if she *saw* you, everything would be ruined. How could you do that?"

"That's why I need to get away from here," he said soothingly, putting an arm around her trembling shoulder. "Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Do you still think it has to be you? What if — what if it were me, instead? What if I married Aylan?"

Olivia recoiled from him, her face as shocked as if he'd slapped her.

"Have you gone completely mad? You *know* it can't be you. Do you want this curse in our line forever?"

He nodded, and stood. "Then I need to go. I'll leave today."

"No."

"Olivia —"

"I still need your help. I can't get to Liam without you."

"But —"

"She left today, and she'll be gone all next week. She's home for her birthday. So wean yourself off this absurd fascination, and be done with it. But you promised me you'd be here until after the ball, so I need you at least until then. This is my only chance. I won't let you ruin it.

.....

Aylan pulled aside the shade on the carriage window for what must have been the twentieth time, amazed at the progress they were making.

"What in the world are they feeding these horses to make them go so fast?" she grumbled. She had half a mind to pound on the ceiling of the coach and tell her driver to slow down, but she was pretty certain she knew how he would answer: *'Begging your pardon, Your Majesty, but the king asked that we hurry you home.'*

"Maybe I'll get lucky and an axle will break," Aylan mused. "Or we'll be set upon by bandits. Or one of the horses will throw a shoe."

Alas, though she wished hard for bad luck, none came. The carriage continued its journey unimpeded, and before long the thudding of the horses' hooves on country roads was replaced with the merry rhythm of trotting upon city cobbles — and then in what seemed like only another instant, they were on the smooth circular drive in front of the castle.

Aylan was home.

"I could refuse to get out of the carriage," she whispered. It was easy to lock the door from the inside, and she'd had a fairly large breakfast. "I could probably hold out for at least a few hours."

She pulled the shade aside again, and spied her parents waiting for her on the castle steps. For a moment her homesickness completely overwhelmed her anxiety. "Stop being a baby," she scolded herself. "They're your parents, and you have to tell them eventually."

Aylan squared her shoulders and pulled the tasseled cord, alerting the footman that she was ready to get out. "Well, here goes nothing."

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Garrick paced back and forth across the elegant carpet in his quarters at the earl's estate, mentally replaying the conversation he'd had with his sister. He hadn't told Olivia, but it had actually been two full weeks since he last snuck away in the night to spend an hour or two near Aylan. The last time he'd gone was after their adventure in Mylamaire, and he'd found Aylan asleep at her hearth, hair disheveled and hands smeared with ash. For the first time, she matched the vision of the servant's daughter he'd grown up with, and it was enough to bring back all the feelings of derision that had been second nature to him before they'd actually met. He left quickly that night, determined to put aside his fascination with her once and for all… but he'd kicked sand over her fire first, just in case. He couldn't stand the idea of flames so dangerously close to her lovely hair.

It had been a relief thinking things could go back to the way the were, but the relief was short lived. He tried to conjure the image of her at the hearth whenever other thoughts crept back into his consciousness, but it was no use. By the fourth night he found it difficult to sleep, by the seventh, impossible. Still, he stayed away from her as long as he could, until one morning he woke after a night of tossing and turning and knew he wouldn't have the strength by midnight to resist going to her any longer. That's when he decided to beg Olivia for an escape. Distance had become necessary…

Or had it?

"Stay or go?" he asked himself aloud. "Stay or go?"

He could placate his sister and stay, but what were the chances of 'weaning himself,' as she'd so delicately put it, in a place

where practically everything made him think of Aylan? The beach, the sea, even the front door of the estate that was his temporary home made him think of the day he'd seen her riding by in the carriage. And of course, from every point in town, the school was visible upon its cliff in the distance.

"So what's it going to be, Garrick?" he asked. "Stay here or leave?"

He looked at the package partially concealed in the far corner of the room. In it was the blue silk he'd bought for her on a whim, and had yet to deliver. "She'd be beautiful in that color," he thought, trying, and failing, to keep the image of her in a pale blue dress from his mind. "This is ridiculous," he finally said aloud. "Clearly the way I've always thought of her is wrong. Aylan Charming is a princess. And maybe she likes sleeping by fireplaces sometimes, and almost catching her hair on fire… but when it comes right down to it, that's not any weirder than how I've been spending my nights. I'm being stupid. There's something between us, and I won't have any peace until I find out what it is."

He snatched up the parcel of fabric and turned toward the door. Olivia had her plans, and now he had his.

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"So," said King Charming, as he walked with his daughter down the beach, "Ashton William Kensington. Only son of Rudyard Kensington of the Northern Country and Beatrice of… hmm, let me think. Where was his mother from again?"

"Er, I'm not sure," answered Aylan.

"Oh, didn't you two get around to discussing your families in the five minutes you've known each other?" He was gratified to

see her squirm under his stern glare. Softening his tone slightly, he added, "she hails from the Fair Isles I believe. The Northern Country is land-locked, while the Fair Isles are right in the middle of a main trade route by sea. Rudyard's father gained familial access to a valuable harbor, and Beatrice's family acquired shiploads of the much-needed timber their sandy islands were lacking. An advantageous match to be sure."

"It sounds so romantic," said Aylan drily.

"Doesn't it? There are rumors, you know, about the Northern Country. Some time ago, the king of that country had twin sons, and he loved them so equally he decided to split his country in two equal parts so each son might have a throne. What we now know as the Northern Country and the Southern Country were once one rather powerful whole."

"Oh, is that how they tell it now?" asked Aylan. The king wondered why she seemed to be looking everywhere but at him.

"Indeed. And the rumor, you see, is that the elder of the twins, the one who became king of the Northern Country, never accepted his father's decision. He believed the entire, united, country should have belonged to him. His eventual marriage, and that of his son, and then his grandson, Rudyard, were all very carefully negotiated. More so even than most royal marriages, and believe me, that's saying something. There are whispers that the Kensingtons are quietly increasing their power and resources in order to someday reunify the two lands by force."

"Do you believe the rumors are true?"

"Given what I know of my own father's dealings with the Northerners, my gut tells me they are. In fact, he once tried to protect them by… well, that's a story for another day. But there is something that has always given me pause."

"What's that?"

"Simply that those who rule the Southern Country have never seemed particularly concerned. My father once told me that he'd never seen a country of middling-size less eager to increase its prospects; indeed, they act as if they're completely assured of their safety. With far better intelligence on the matter than I possess, if they fear no aggression from the Northerners, then I must assume the rumors are simply that — rumors."

"Dad, why are you telling me all of this?"

"Because this is the family you're marrying into!" he snapped. "These are things you should know!"

Aylan finally looked up at him, clearly startled by his tone. "I — I will," she stammered. "I'm learning."

The King took a deep breath. "I'm sorry," he said, "forgive me. I want to hear all about Ashton, I do, but I just need this one answer first. I need to understand *why* a young man who was most certainly prepared to marry whomever his father decided would be most valuable to Northern ambition, would suddenly break with a lifetime of grooming and propose to a girl he met on the beach?"

"Because he loves me."

"Are you sure? You barely know each other. Are you sure that's his reason?"

"Am I sure he loves me? Well I don't know, dad, were you sure you loved mom when you married her without even knowing her full name?"

The king froze. *She finally knows*. "That was different," he mumbled. "Your mother and I… we were different. She was the first thing I'd ever been certain of in my entire life."

"And do you think such a thing could never happen to anyone else?"

"No of course not. But you're my daughter, and he's… well he's…"

"Your future son-in-law."

The King was surprised at Aylan's forcefulness. He'd felt a deep sense of unease ever since receiving Ashton's letter, but perhaps his worries were unfounded. *Maybe its true. Maybe it happened as innocently as Ashton claimed; maybe she really does love him.* "Tell me about him," said the King. "Tell me about this future son-in-law of mine."

"Well, he's… big."

"Big?"

"Tall, I mean. And strong."

"Anything else?"

"He's intense. Very intense. And, umm, loyal?"

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

"He's loyal."

"Well I suppose that's a good quality to have in a spouse. You know, you're not nearly as gushing as I'd expect from a woman in love. Your fiancé, however, doesn't share your reticence." He reached into his pocket and pulled out the sheet of well-worn vellum he'd been carrying with him every day since it had arrived. He scanned it for the passage he wanted, cleared his throat and read:

> *I hope you will be forgiving enough to overlook our forming the engagement without your consent. In any other time, with any other girl, I'd have sought your permission and blessing before even entertaining the idea of a proposal. But Aylan — loving her — feels so natural to me, like breathing. The thought of having a life without her now that I've found*

her is unbearable. And so, not knowing what plans you may have already made for her, I hope you will understand the urgency I felt in securing her as my future wife.

"You realize, of course," said the king, "that if I were to let your mother read this letter, she would melt into a puddle on the floor."

Aylan smiled. "I suppose he does have a way with words."

"Oh, but that's not even the whole of it; he continues:

Growing up, I always knew I'd someday marry a princess. It was a duty — one of many — and I thought of it as such. I expected to be the kind of man who'd do anything for the sake of his country, for is his country not the true bride of a king? But Aylan has upended all of that. Where once I felt resigned to my duty, now I feel an excitement for the future that is beyond my talent to fully describe. She's brought joy into my life, and nothing will ever be the same…

"Seriously, Aylan, I'm not sure I can *ever* allow your mother to read this. She'd swoon. And when she stopped swooning, she'd demand I write her her own love letter immediately."

"You don't write mom love letters?"

"I'm more an actions-speak-louder-than-words kind of guy."

"Like hunting down a woman you barely knew, with a glass shoe as your only clue, and marrying her the moment you found her?"

"Yes, like that. And I'm still cashing in on that one, if you know what I mean."

"Too much information, dad. Way too much."

The king chuckled. "Aylan, we clearly have a lot to talk about on that front, and believe me when I say, it's a conversation I've wanted to have with you and your brother for a long time now. But the most important thing you need to know is the thing I hope you've *always* known: that I love your mother. I will always love her. And so it didn't matter to me who she was or where she came from. It only mattered that I loved her."

"Dad, I understand. I wish I'd heard the story at home, rather than at school, but I understand. And now I'm asking you to understand."

The king looked his daughter up and down, and sighed. "Ok, Lan," he said with a weak smile. "I trust you. You've never given me any reason not to. And I'm happy for you as well."

"Thanks, dad."

King Charming noted the glassy shine over his daughter's eyes, and hoped they were tears of happiness. "Tomorrow at breakfast," he said, "we'll break the news to your mother."

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In front of a crackling fire in his private study, King Charming pulled Ashton's letter from his pocket once more. Sleep had eluded him ever since he and Aylan's talk earlier in the evening. Something about her had seemed off… and yet she was just the same. "Can I really question her, though?" he murmured to himself. "Is this not what I've wanted for her all along? To find someone on her own to love, without our meddling?"

It was… and yet he felt the odd notion that he'd have been happier had Aylan come with the news that she'd accepted one of

Gunner's many proposals, than that she was engaged to the heir of the Northern Country. He returned to the letter; it seemed almost as though Ashton had anticipated his misgivings. His mind wandered to the rumors — which were far more rampant than he'd led Aylan to believe — about the North's determination to overthrow the Southern Country. Ashton's father had acquired a strategic port, was it so hard to believe that Ashton was trying to acquire something even more valuable? King Charming though uneasily of his own powerful army, which was the envy of the world's many sovereigns.

"Oh Lan," he whispered, "I do hope you know what you're doing."

Chapter Twenty-Two

"Aylan is *what*?" gasped the queen, dropping her silver breakfast spoon and splattering the table with porridge and honey.

"Engaged. Affianced. Betrothed. In how many ways do I need to spell this out for you, darling?"

Aylan noted that her father seemed far more enthusiastic about her engagement than he had the previous night. Or perhaps that had more to do with how much he enjoyed teasing her mother. Oddly, Liam seemed rather nonplussed by the announcement.

"I knew it!" he cried, settling smugly back into his chair. "I just knew something was going on between you and Garrick. It was so obvious the way you two couldn't keep your gooey eyes off each other that day on my ship. And then you go missing and he was frantic, literally *frantic*..."

"Liam, what in the world are you talking about?" said the king. "Who is Garrick? And when did Aylan go missing? And *why* —— "

"It's not Garrick anyway, Liam," Aylan said, quickly cutting off her father's dangerous line of questioning. "It's —"

"HOLD ON JUST A MOMENT," yelled the queen, banging her spoon against the table and halting the chatter. "Aylan is getting *married*?"

"She is indeed, my dear," said the king, grinning at the mess of porridge that now surrounded his wife.

"Well who in the world is she marrying?"

"Yeah, who are you marrying?" asked Liam, "I was so sure there was something going on between you and Garrick."

"Who is this Garrick character?" the King thundered, "and why do we keep bringing him up?"

"More importantly," urged the queen, clearly about to afflict bodily harm on her husband if he did not answer her questions, "*who* is Aylan marrying? Oh goodness, it's not Gunner, is it? Aylan, tell me you haven't finally said yes to Gunner."

"Hey!" cried Liam, "What's wrong with Gunner?"

"Nothing dear, he's a lovely boy. He just has… well a bit of a smell."

"That's because his job is shoveling horse manure."

"Well I suppose if Aylan has decided to marry him, we can finally convince him to take a better job. And perhaps also a bath."

"It's not Gunner," said the king with a laugh. "Although that was our next order of business this morning. Deciding who's going to break it to the poor lad that Aylan is engaged."

"Not it!" said Aylan and Liam in unison.

"For the love of all that is holy!" shrieked the queen. "Can we please stop this nonsensical chatter for two seconds so *someone* can tell me who Aylan is marrying?"

"Of course, my dear," said the king, finally taking pity on his wife. "Aylan is marrying Price Ashton William Kensington, heir to the Northern Country. They met one day on the beach near her school. You could ask Aylan about it, but I can tell you that she's a pretty stingy storyteller. So you might as well read his letter instead."

King Charming pulled Ashton's note from his cloak and handed it into his wife's eager grasp, and the family watched expectantly as she unfolded it and began to read. After a moment the queen's hand fluttered to her heart, and soon after, her eyes became shiny with tears. The king nudged Aylan with his elbow. "What did I tell you? A puddle on the floor, just as I predicted." Aylan smiled weakly, but remained silent.

"Oh Aylan," gushed the queen, "He sounds wonderful! *Loving her feels so natural to me*... Oh I could just cry!"

"Elle, my love," laughed the king, "you *are* crying."

"I know," she whispered, brushing a finger over her lashes, "but it's just such a beautiful story. Like a fairytale. And the way he writes about her! I wouldn't mind getting a letter like this."

"You want Ashton to send a letter declaring his love for you? I think Aylan and I might both have a few things to say about that."

"No, you idiot, I want you to!" said the queen with a playful smack.

The King chuckled heartily, totally unabashed. "Told you so," he mouthed at Aylan.

"Oh my goodness," cried the queen, suddenly snapping to attention. "There's so much to do! How could you not have told me about this sooner? I don't know how I can possibly get everything done in the next three days."

"*Mom*," choked Aylan, "I have no intention of getting married this week, or even this year!"

"Silly girl, I'm not talking about your wedding. You aren't even eighteen yet! I know you're eager and in love, but royal engagements often last well over a year or more, so you should at least wait until you're twenty…"

"Or maybe even thirty," added the king.

"…but that doesn't mean we shouldn't have an engagement party soon to make the announcement," continued the queen, ignoring her husband. "And since everyone will already be here on Thursday, I thought… umm…"

"Way to blow the surprise, Elle," laughed King Charming.

"Oops."

"Who's coming Thursday?" demanded Aylan and Liam at the same moment.

"Well we thought we'd have a surprise birthday party," answered the queen sheepishly, "so we invited Aylan's friends from school. They should be arriving Thursday morning and staying on for the weekend… but since everyone will be gathered anyway, why not make the big announcement then!"

"But we were planning to wait until the Winter Ball," gasped Aylan, struggling to hide her horror. "I don't think — "

"Don't be ridiculous! Happy news spreads quickly, if you wait until then, no one will be surprised! No fun in that. Now then, is this young gentleman of yours staying in town? We'll need to get a message to him straight away."

"Already taken care of," said the king. "I sent word the moment I received his letter."

"Which of Aylan's friends are coming?" asked Liam.

Aylan snorted. "What he's really asking is if *Gala* is coming."

"Why yes, Gala *is* coming," said the queen, turning to her son with a fascinated glint in her eyes. "She was at the top of the list that Aylan's maid Emmie sent. Why, do you know her?"

"Not as well as he'd like to," taunted Aylan. "Go on, Liam, tell mom the story. I'm going to go check on Palisade."

Her brother's glare was strong enough as she slipped out of the room, that Aylan thought she could physically feel it burning a hole through the back of her dress. She knew it was a nasty trick, but the breakfast room had become suffocating, and she needed space to breath — preferably far away from the castle and her mother's party planning. Her engagement would be public in three more days, and once it was public, it'd be real. Surely Liam would forgive her… eventually.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Gunner looked up from his work bench in alarm as the stable doors flew open and Aylan tumbled through.

"I was just finishing polishing up your sidesaddle," he stuttered. "Ol' Ryden is sick this morning 'else it would have been done by now. Give me ten more minutes and I can…" Gunner stopped talking as he took in the wild look in Aylan's eyes. He knew how to read horses, and reading people wasn't much different; Aylan was clearly trying to escape from something.

"Lan, are you ok?"

"Yes… No. I don't know. I just need to get away for a bit."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"No. Thank you. I want to be alone."

Gunner cocked his head to the side. If she were a horse he'd have pet her nose to soothe her until the anxious energy coming off her in waves was gone… but obviously he couldn't pet

Aylan's nose. "Although it might make her laugh at least," he reasoned.

"And… you're sure you're coming back once you go… right?"

Aylan looked as if she might burst into tears. "Yes, of course," she whispered. "Of course I'll come back."

"Ok, never mind about the saddle then," said Gunner. "Palisade has already been fed and exercised; she's waiting in the yard. With Ryden out, no one's here to see you 'cept me, and you know I keep your secrets. Get going. I'll leave your saddle in that big dune where we used to hide it when — well you know the one. Just fit her up before you come back and no one'll be the wiser." Gunner wanted badly to hug her, but he could tell she didn't want him to, so he stood awkwardly with his hands hanging at his sides. "Go on then, get out of here. I'll be here when you get back, so make sure you come back."

Suddenly Aylan threw her arms around him and kissed his cheek. "Thank you," she said.

Gunner grinned. "Well don't stop now. How 'bout a kiss for the other side, too? To keep things balanced."

"Maybe next year," said Aylan, finally smiling.

"You always say that," he said with a wink. "I been waitin' for next year my whole life. But it's just as well you won't kiss me again since things are never balanced between us, eh? Now get out of here, for goodness sake!"

Aylan smiled wider and then turned and hurried out to find Palisade. Gunner stood for a moment staring at the door after she'd gone, and then shook his head with a grin. He turned to the horse in the nearest stall and patted its nose. "Yep," he said to the gray thoroughbred, "that princess *definitely* wants to marry me."

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Aylan kept riding for miles, until she was far enough down the shore that the palace was just a tiny white speck on the horizon; at last, she felt secure. She slid down from Palisade's back and patted the horse's neck.

"Well girl, what should we do now?" she asked. The query was met with a gentle nuzzle. "No answers? That's ok…I don't have any answers either." Aylan reached into the pocket of her gown and rolled the sapphires of her grandmother's necklace between her fingers. "How about you?" she said, pulling the necklace out and holding it up to catch the light. "After that day in etiquette class, I expected a constant stream of good luck with you in my pocket. That doesn't seem to be working out so well though, does it?"

The necklace sparkled cheerfully back at her, and Aylan felt strangely comforted. Instead of shoving it back into the folds of her gown, she fastened the necklace around her neck, and then sat down in the sand, settling back on her elbows to gaze at the ocean as she let her thoughts drift.

"I'm engaged," she murmured aloud. "I'm *engaged.*"

The whole thing felt unreal, improbable, impossible. And it didn't help that every time she tried picturing herself as an actual bride in an actual wedding, it was Garrick, and not Ashton, she saw at the end of the aisle.

"Stupid Garrick," she grumbled, stretching into a more comfortable position on the sand. "Stupid Garrick, with his stupid green eyes."

She wondered what color his eyes would have been if the first King Garrick hadn't been such a colossal ass. *Brown maybe. Yes, a rich chocolate brown like Ashton's. That would suit him… soften him.* Aylan closed her own eyes, and concentrated on creating a brown-eyed Garrick in her mind…

Before long, she was drifting off into a familiar dream, but the new brown eyes remained.

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"Aylan! Aylan can you hear me? Open your eyes, Aylan, *please.*"

"What in the world are you shouting about?" thought Aylan through the gauzy haze of slumber. "Leave me alone, can't you see I'm sleeping?" Her indignant protests registered as nothing more than a murmured sigh and a shifting of her face away from the voice that was calling her back from a pleasant dream.

"That's it, sweetheart, I know you can hear me. Aylan, I need you to open your eyes if you can hear me. Please, just open your eyes."

She felt a light pressure at her wrist, and the tiny spark of consciousness in her mind understood that the voice above her was checking her pulse. "But that's impossible," she thought. "He'd never have come here. He'd have no reason to come here… and he's calling me sweetheart? Impossible." She turned her wrist upward and grasped the fingers that slipped across her palm. She felt the undeniable warmth of a hand in her own. *Impossible.*

For a moment his thumb traced the length of her knuckles, and then he slipped his hand from hers, never breaking the contact

between their skin. She felt the touch of his palm as it ran the length of her arm, cupped over her shoulder, and then slid up her neck. His fingers tangled in her hair as he cradled her head, but the sensation was not unpleasant. She tried to turn, to nuzzle her face into his palm, but a small pressure of his hand against the nape of her neck told her that he wished her to be still. She relaxed back into the support of his palm, believing that she'd follow any instruction he gave her, save one: She would not open her eyes. She knew that if she did the dream would end, and she didn't want it to end.

Suddenly, inexplicably, she felt a gentle flexing of his fingers, and then the weight of her own body in his arms as he lifted her toward him. "He's going to kiss me," she thought, her lips parting slightly in anticipation. "Please, please let me never wake up."

For one single moment he held her, cradling her in the crook of his elbow, and then her body was dropping again, back toward the sand and away from his face. "No!" she cried out in her mind. "No, no, no!" Her fists clenched angrily and she shook her head back and forth in protest — and only then did she realize that her head was being cushioned by something soft that hadn't been there before, and that her hand was not empty, but clutched around another. Aylan gave up, and opened her eyes.

"Garrick," she whispered, blinking furiously to bring his face into focus. "What are you doing here?"

"I'll explain later. But right now, try not to talk or move. You've had a bad fall, but I'm going to get you help. Just be still."

"What are you talking about? I haven't fallen. I'm fine."

"Shh," he said, gently but firmly pushing her shoulder back down. "Just try to lay still."

The patch of her skin beneath his hand felt more alive than any other part of her body. She settled back without complaint.

"Where did this pillow come from?" she asked.

"Pillow?"

"Beneath my head."

"It's not a pillow, Aylan. I should think that would be rather obvious." He cocked his eyebrow with just the slightest hint of amusement. Her eyes drifted reluctantly from his face and then stopped abruptly just bellow his collarbone.

"Oh."

His body was naked from neck to hips. Her breath caught in her throat at the sight.

"Um, Aylan? Do you mind?"

Her eyes snapped back to his face, and she felt her cheeks flush red at the same instant she caught the flash of gloating in his smile. "Sorry," she mumbled. Perhaps she really had fallen and hit her head as he'd suggested, and this was all just a vivid hallucination. At the moment, that was the only theory that made any sense. With a larger effort than should have been necessary, Aylan shut her eyes again and began to take inventory of her own body, beginning at her toes. Each one wiggled in turn, and her ankles moved freely and without pain. There was no throbbing in her shins or knees or thighs, no pain in her belly or beneath her ribs. Her fingers moved with her will, her elbows and wrists bent, her head turned back and forth with not the least bit of discomfort. The only symptom of trauma she could discover was a bit of dizziness, but that was easily attributable to the scent of Garrick's cologne that hit her when she turned her head against his shirt. It

was intoxicating. She opened her eyes once more. He was still there. He was real.

"Garrick, I don't think that I'm hurt anywhere; I really think I'm fine."

She began to sit up to prove her point, but he gently pushed her back down again. She felt the same surge of heat flowing through his fingers and spreading over her skin, but this time she shook it off and refused to settle back into her makeshift cushion. She pushed his hand away and sat up straight.

"Here," she said, handing him his shirt. "I don't need this. I'm seriously fine. If I seem confused it's because I was napping and you're the last person on Earth I expected to wake me. What are you doing here?"

"*Napping*, Aylan? Really?"

"What is so unbelievable about having a nap on the beach?"

"Unaccompanied? Sprawled on the sand with the tide coming in just inches from your feet? Not to mention, you're basically asking to be robbed wearing that necklace."

Aylan put a protective hand over her jewels. "You appear unaccompanied as well."

"I am not a princess."

"So?"

"So I can be unaccompanied and it's fine."

"They have weird rules in your country."

Garrick groaned. "We're not talking about me right now! I'm not the one who needs help at the moment."

"Neither am I!"

Garrick reached over and plucked a shell from a fold in her gown. When he lifted it to her eye level a small red claw wriggled

out and began swinging in impotent rage. Apparently the swaths of her dress were so filled with sand, that the little traitor had decided to make itself a rather luxurious burrow. Aylan glared at it, but the crab, like Garrick, seemed unaffected by her annoyance.

"Well then," she said, changing tack, "since you're so smart, and so convinced I've fallen, explain to me what in the world I'd have had to fall off *of* out here. It's flat as a penny; there's hardly anything to even trip on."

"Your horse."

"My *horse*?"

"Obviously."

"Don't be absurd. I've been riding practically since I could walk. There's no way I would fall off Palisade."

"Then where is her saddle?"

"Er, that's difficult to explain."

"I can actually think of only two explanations for why a princess would be accompanied by a horse with no saddle."

"Ah, so you admit that I am, in fact, 'accompanied.'"

"The horse doesn't count."

"Your word, not mine."

"Ok, fine. I can think of only two explanations for why a princess would be laying on the ground in close proximity to, though not necessarily accompanied by, a horse with no saddle. Either that princess and her saddle were both thrown from the horse, or that princess inexplicably woke at the crack of dawn and decided to take her horse on a five mile walk down the shore, rendering a saddle unnecessary."

"And what if I did? A long trek at dawn would certainly explain my need for a nap, would it not?"

"Yes it would. But it wouldn't explain the lack of anything but hoof prints in the sand. Aylan, it's ok if you don't remember; a bump on the head can do that to you. It's nothing to be ashamed of. Now if you would please just lie still, I'll —

"For goodness sake! I didn't walk, and I didn't fall. I was in the mood for a ride, and my saddle was still in the middle of being adjusted and polished when I got to the stables. I had no time to wait, so I decided to go riding without one."

Garrick burst out laughing. "You really expect me to believe you rode that horse with no saddle? Aylan, please, enough joking around."

"I'm not joking!" she cried, irritation beginning to take hold. "And if you won't believe me, I'll prove it to you."

"By all means," he said, gesturing toward the horse. "But once you realize that I've called your bluff, I'd very much appreciate it if you'd allow me to get you some help."

She reached down and threw a handful of wet sand at his head, sparking another outburst of laughter. "Fine," she said. "If I'm bluffing, I'll lay down and let you play nursemaid. But if I prove to you that I am not bluffing, which is what I shall do presently, what do I get from you?"

His lips twitched, but his eyes smoldered. "Do you want me to lay down so *you* can play nursemaid?"

"Tempting. But instead, I want you to kiss me," she said, "and I want you to like it."

His eyes widened in surprise, but he quickly composed himself and struck out his hand to shake. "Deal."

"Deal," she answered. She jumped to her feet and whistled for Palisade. As she strode away from him she called back over her shoulder, "shall we race? Make it more interesting?"

"More interesting? What could possibly be more interesting than watching you try to ride sidesaddle on a horse with no saddle? I don't believe that's even physically possible. But with a kiss on the line, I'm hoping for a miracle."

Aylan blushed. "Who said anything about *sidesaddle*?"

"Is there any other way for a lady to ride?"

"Indeed, there is," thought Aylan, taking a deep breath. "But I'm probably making a horrible mistake right now showing you. Oh well, too late now."

With one last defiant stare, she pulled herself atop her horse, arranged her skirts around her, and turned for Garrick's reaction.

His jaw dropped. "But… but you're! Who taught you?"

"You were right when you said it'd be difficult to ride sidesaddle with no saddle. But luckily my brother taught me to ride astride, so I don't need one."

"Like a man though!"

"Yes, like a man. Are we still racing?"

Garrick's mouth snapped shut and his eyes narrowed. He stared at Aylan speculatively for a moment, and then grinned. "You're damn right we are!"

In one bounding leap he was atop his own horse, and kicked in his heels only a second after an amazed Aylan kicked in hers. Sand exploded up from under two sets of eager hooves. They were off.

Aylan took advantage of her small lead, and yanked Palisade hard to the left, cutting across Garrick's line, and leading the horse to the more densely packed sand at the water's edge. The extra traction gave the pair a burst of speed and Aylan whooped loudly, urging Palisade to run faster. A heavy splashing told her

Garrick had followed her lead, and soon she sensed the other horse pounding through the water at Palisade's left flank. She tried to pull further into the surf to block Garrick's way, but his horse was too fast. In another moment, the two riders were neck-in-neck, both crouched low, willing their chargers onward — but the stalemate ended quickly. A sheet of water soaked Aylan's skirt as Garrick surged ahead and guided his horse directly into her path.

"Come on, come on, girl!" Aylan urged Palisade. "Just a little faster!" She knew it was useless. Even if Palisade could muster more speed — and the strain in her muscles and lather on her neck told clearly that she couldn't — Garrick could use his horse's significant size advantage to block any maneuver. Angrily Aylan swept the wind-blown hair from her brow, already feeling the sting of defeat, but as her hand dropped back down, it grazed the blue gemstones of her grandmother's necklace at her throat. As on the day of the slingshot incident, the sapphires were warm to the touch — much warmer than they should have been. Suddenly Aylan felt an odd moment of clarity. She grasped the necklace in her fist, and the warmth of the stones surged through her wrist like a hot liquid broth, up her arm and then her neck, and by the time the warmth reached her throat it had transformed into the confidant voice of a woman who knew she was about to win. "Palisade," she ordered evenly, "*run faster.*"

The horse surged forward, nearly throwing her, in an extraordinary burst of speed.

A quarter of a mile up the shore was a jagged outcrop of stone that both riders knew to be their finish line; the formation was the only break in the smooth landscape for miles. Aylan desperately clung to Palisade's neck as they cut a wide berth to Garrick's right, angling for the black rocks ahead. Since her horse

no longer seemed to need her guidance, Aylan risked a peek to her left to find Garrick staring dumbfounded. The mild fear for her life she was experiencing prevented her from laughing, but she still managed to stick out her tongue at him as she sailed past.

By the time Aylan and Palisade passed the first of the black rocks and began to slow, they'd traveled nearly three full lengths beyond Garrick and his horse.

Her adrenaline, too, should've been slowing now that she was riding at a manageable pace, but instead Aylan found her heart rate spiking yet again, as she faced the prospect of turning to see Garrick. She had no idea what he thought of her now that he'd seen her ride, or after she'd been so forward in setting the terms of their bet. "Too late to worry about it now," she murmured, as she finally pulled Palisade to a halt.

"What in the world do you feed that horse?" exclaimed Garrick as he trotted up beside her.

"That's a state secret," Aylan answered with a giggle.

"I'd wager the fact that you can ride like a man is a state secret as well."

"Not even my dad knows about that. Only Liam. And Gunner."

"I don't know what to say. That was… you're very unexpected."

"You could congratulate me on my win."

"Congratulations."

"I'm glad you're still speaking to me. Liam is convinced my prospects would be ruined for all eternity if anyone found out."

"I'll admit it was a shock. But am I scandalized? No. You're the one woman who could pull it off."

Aylan smiled. "Well then, if you aren't scandalized… what about my prize?"

"Your prize? What was… *Oh.*"

"It's ok," said Aylan hastily, her cheeks burning at his reluctance. "I gave you a loophole, after all."

"A loophole?"

"Yes. I said I wanted you to kiss me, but also that you had to like it. So it's fine, forget the whole thing. I wasn't being serious anyway." Aylan stared at her hands; she was positive her face was about to burst into flame.

"No," said Garrick. "A bet's a bet. I'm not going to be the man who loses to a girl and isn't true to his word all on the same day. If I lose my pride and my honor both, what would be left of me?"

Aylan looked up, hearing the smile in his voice. "Well —

"Don't answer that, please," he said with a laugh. "Aylan, truthfully, if the surprise of seeing you jump up on that horse hadn't so thoroughly erased our bet from my mind, I don't think I'd have tried *quite* so hard to beat you. But you've earned your prize if you want it, because I did my best not to let you win. You're a good rider, for a girl."

"For anyone."

"Ok, yes. For anyone."

"Thank you."

Slowly, without breaking their eye contact, Garrick dismounted his horse and walked to her side. He offered his hands to help her down, and after a brief hesitation to marvel at what was happening, Aylan leaned forward and put her own hands on his shoulders. He grasped her waist, and gravity took care of the rest. Suddenly, she was in his arms, pressed against his chest an instant

longer than what was needed to ensure her balance. She didn't pull away.

"Aylan, you said I had to like it," he murmured against her hair. "I just want you to know, that even though I haven't kissed you yet, I'm pretty sure it's already my favorite thing to do."

Aylan smiled up at him. "I think you need to lie down," she answered. "You must've fallen off your horse while I was busy beating you, and hit your head."

"Aylan, shut up."

He cupped her face in both hands, and kissed her.

For the second time that day, Aylan felt a surge of heat through her veins, but this time the warmth she felt was skin upon skin; the blue gemstones at her throat were cold.

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"So Liam taught you that, did he?" asked Garrick as they walked slowly together down the beach.

"Oh, believe me, it took months of wheedling and bribing and practically a year's worth of my allowance to talk him into it. And once I did, he made me borrow clothes from Gunner and hide my hair in a hat so that no one would recognize me during our lessons. Then he swore me to eternal secrecy. Honestly, I don't see what the big deal is."

"It's just the way things are done, I guess. Ladies wear dresses and ride sidesaddle, and men —

"And men get to have all the fun."

Garrick smiled at her pout. "Honestly, I never really thought about it before today. But although that was by far the

most fun I've ever had losing a race, I'm rather glad you've sworn an oath of secrecy."

"Only to Liam. I'm free to tell whomever I please that I beat *you*."

Garrick grinned and reached for her hand. "You're rather cheeky, you know that? I like that about you." He was pleased to see a blush of pink color her cheeks at his compliment. Aylan was adventurous and quick-witted, but he could see there was a softness there too, waiting for him to find. "You know, I should have known better than to think you were in trouble back there. That's the second time I thought I was coming to your rescue. My damsel seems never to be in distress."

"The second time?" asked Aylan.

"Yes. The first was in Mylamaire when you wandered off after our fight. I was already feeling guilty about letting you leave on your own, and then when we couldn't find you, my imagination might've run a bit wild. I convinced myself that you'd been kidnapped and were being held hostage, or worse. Truly, there was a moment when I thought I'd never see you again. And then when it turned out you were just having a chat and some tea, well, I felt pretty stupid."

"You weren't stupid," Aylan whispered, her voice oddly choked.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's nothing. Would you have been sad if I'd been kidnapped and you never saw me again?"

Garrick pulled her to a stop. Something about her made him want to answer truthfully. "Aylan, you might think I'm crazy for saying this, but I would have been devastated. You've been

constantly in my head since the day you rode by me in that carriage."

"The day of our stare down?"

"Indeed. I think I won *that* contest at least."

"It was a tie."

"No, you forfeited when your carriage turned the corner."

"That doesn't make sense; I wasn't driving the carriage!"

"I don't care if it makes sense, I get to win this time. But anyway, from then on, even though I hadn't spoken with you yet, you were always in my thoughts. My dreams even."

"I've dreamt of you, too."

"Really?" he asked, surprised at exactly how happy that made him, and hoping it wasn't obvious on his face. "What did you dream about?"

Aylan blushed again. "Let's just say, real life turned out to be far better than my dreams. If this even is real life. I'm starting to think maybe I did hit my head, and this is all just a vivid hallucination."

"I think we've established that you did not, in fact, fall off that irritatingly fast horse of yours."

"True. But I had a concussion once when I was fourteen. Maybe this is all just a super-long-term side effect of that. Not that I'm complaining, mind you."

Garrick smiled. "And how, pray tell, did you end up with a concussion? Wait, let me guess. Was it bull-riding? Jousting without a helmet? No wait, I've got it — you were standing too close to a lit cannon, weren't you?"

Aylan punched his arm. "I do actually do some feminine things too, you know."

"Do you? Like what?"

"Um, well, I sometimes help my mother with the sewing she does for her charities."

"I bet you hate it."

"Hate is a strong word. I also dance. There's nothing more feminine than dancing."

"Are you any good at it?"

"Not exactly. That's actually how I ended up with the concussion."

Garrick's laughter was loud enough to scare a pair of gulls from their nearby perch, but it ended quickly when he saw Aylan's stormy expression. "Well look at you," he said, still grinning. "You're pouting! Turns out you are rather feminine after all; nothing girlier than pouting."

Faster than he could react, Aylan reached down and lobbed yet another handful of wet sand at his head. Garrick closed his eyes in time, but not his mouth, and it was Aylan's turn to laugh as he sputtered and spit, nearly gagging on the salty grains. He narrowed his eyes at her, and Aylan turned to run, clearly expecting retribution, but what Garrick had in mind was far more expedient than tossing around more sand. He grabbed her by the wrist and spun her around, thereupon gifting her with a deep salty kiss. When he pulled back, Aylan looked dazed, her pink lips sprinkled with sand and her pupils huge in her beautiful blue eyes.

"Now then, princess," Garrick said, holding her against him, "You have an older brother who taught you to ride like a man, could he not have also taught you to take a joke?"

"Oh he did," Aylan answered, "but remember, sir, that you are not my brother. His jokes are actually funny."

"No," he answered, skimming his thumb across her lower lip and ignoring her jab, "I am not your brother. And I'm glad I'm not."

"You wouldn't want me for your sister?" Aylan asked, batting her eyelashes up at him theatrically. "You've seen how fun I am."

"I don't want you for a sister, a cousin, or even a friend," he answered.

Aylan's eyes widened in surprise. "Garrick, I was only teasing," she said. "I didn't mean to offend you. I'm sure you tell funny jokes."

"No, you were right, I'm terrible at telling jokes. But still, I'm sorry, we can't be friends."

"But… why? I don't understand."

Garrick didn't answer, but leaned in and kissed her jaw, just under her ear. "Is Cole your *friend*?" he murmured against her skin.

"Yes," she replied with a shiver.

"Is Gunner your *friend*?" he asked, letting his lips run lightly over her ear.

"Yes, Gunner is my friend too."

"And if Gunner were to kiss you here," he whispered, pressing his lips to her throat…

"I'd punch him in the face."

Garrick nearly choked trying to hold back his laughter, but kept a straight face. He pulled back and looked her in the eyes. "Good. If he ever tries it, you tell me, and I'll punch him in the face too. But you haven't punched me in the face. Why is that?"

Aylan exhaled slowly. "Because I don't want to be your *friend* either."

"And to think that there was ever a time when we didn't see eye to eye," he murmured with a grin, before kissing her mouth in a decidedly un-friendly way.

"I can't imagine," Aylan agreed in a breathy whisper.

Garrick kissed her again, lightly. "Stay there," he said. "I have a canteen of water in one of my saddle bags. If I keep kissing you like this, we'll both end up sucking sand from between our teeth for weeks." He turned from her and walked to his horse. Though a cold drink would be welcome, the water was only an excuse. He needed to stop touching her for a moment and breathe. He'd meant what he said about not wanting her for a sister, cousin, or friend, but the part he left out was the part he'd said aloud only in his mind: that he wanted her for a wife. "Livy's going to be so pissed at me," he murmured, grinning. "Aylan Charming. Of all the princesses, in all the world." For a moment he felt a wisp of the familiar derision stir in his gut when he said her name, but what remained of that habit, ingrained over a lifetime, was quickly obliterated by the simple memory of the smoothness of her cheek under his finger tips. "I really have been wrong this whole time," he said with a laugh.

"What's so funny?" Aylan asked as he walked back and handed her the canteen.

"Oh, I was just feeling the same way you do — that maybe I've bumped my head and none of this is real." He grabbed her hand and kissed it. "Turns out I was right about one thing though: kissing you is, indeed, my favorite thing to do."

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They continued on for an hour or so, wandering down the beach toward the castle, talking endlessly. Aylan wasn't even aware of how much distance they'd covered until she was taken by surprise when they came upon the high patch of scrub and sea grass where Gunner had hidden her saddle.

"I didn't realize we were already so close to home," she murmured.

"Time does seem to pass rather quickly with you," Garrick agreed. "Even counting all those times we had to stop walking because you couldn't keep your hands off me, we still made it back faster than I expected." He tried unsuccessfully to duck as Aylan smacked him. "See? There you go again, hands all over me."

"I'm pretty sure *you're* the one who wanted to kiss *me* every hundred yards or so, and not the other way around," Aylan replied, trying her best to sound haughty. "I am a very proper princess after all, and would never be so forward with my affection."

"Ah, yes, my sweet, proper girl, who rides like a boy."

"Hold that thought," said Aylan, as she began digging through the tall grass.

"What are you doing?"

"Ah-ha! Here it is," she said proudly, as she pulled her elegant side saddle from its hiding place.

"Where in the world did that come from?"

"Gunner hid it for me. Luckily he was the only one out to see me leave, but I certainly can't show up back at the stables with my horse and no saddle."

"Right. People would come up with all sorts of crazy ideas if you did that," Garrick said, rolling his eyes. "Is it wrong that I'm slightly annoyed that Gunner found a way to help you today, and I didn't?"

"If you come back to the stables with me, you can be even more annoyed when I thank him for the help, and he asks me to marry him."

"Ha! Yes, Cole told me about his serial proposals. I guess I can't fault him for his exceptional taste in women. Now that we're so close though, I should go. Surely there are people nearby who'd recognize you, and it's probably best if we aren't seen alone together. But I hope I can trust you not to give in to Gunner's offer of marriage? I'd be devastated to lose my chance with you."

Aylan's eyes widened in surprise. "I will do my best not to succumb to his many charms," she answered, arching a brow.

"I know the pungent aroma of horse dung is a powerful aphrodisiac, but yes, please try."

"I'll stay strong and resist. For you."

"Thank you."

Aylan looked down at her hands, suddenly shy. The sense of fantasy — that the entire day they'd spent together wasn't reality, but just a dream — had never left her. And now that the day was ending, she felt once more like the girl she'd been hours ago, lying on the beach and refusing to open her eyes, hoping the dream might never end.

"Aylan," Garrick said softly, calling her back from her reverie. "If you've no other plans for tomorrow, I'd really like to see you again."

"You would?"

"Of course I would. Name a time and place, and I'll meet you, even if it's just for a little while. I like spending time with you. Talking to you."

"Kissing me?"

"That too," he answered with a grin.

"Still your favorite thing?"

"Right now I think everything about you is my favorite thing. And just so you know, I'm not normally the sort to say things like that out loud. There's just something about you though; I can't seem to help myself."

Aylan felt as if her heart might burst with happiness. "I like spending time with you, too."

"Good. Because after tomorrow, there's a good chance I'll ask to see you the next day as well. And the next after that. But tomorrow — where should we go?"

"I know a place," said Aylan. "Do you know where the river runs along the far edge of the village? There's a small footbridge, and on the other side a path that winds up a wooded ravine. You'll find an oddly shaped rock formation about half a mile up the path; it looks almost like a pair of wings. I'll try to slip out after breakfast tomorrow and meet you there, and then I'll take you to the place."

"Tomorrow then," he said, bending to kiss her hand.

"Tomorrow."

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Aylan watched him ride away until he was barely more than a speck on the horizon. The dream-like quality of the day seemed to slip away as quickly as he did, until suddenly, when he finally disappeared from view, stark reality set in. Aylan's mind was instantly filled with the one thing that had been completely blocked from her consciousness from the moment she'd opened her eyes to find Garrick there — and she had a strong suspicion about where the fog that had erased such an important detail had come from.

She grasped her necklace. "What have I done?" she gasped. "I can't be with Garrick, I'm already engaged to Ashton!"

And the whole world would know it in just a few more days.

Chapter Twenty-Four

"Aylan," called the queen, "come in here, please."

Damn. She'd thought she was being sneaky coming in through the kitchen entrance and making her way toward the residence by way of the servants' passage. Apparently not. She peeked her head into the kitchen, where a cheery fire was bouncing golden light off the copper pots hanging from the beams of the ceiling, and spied her mother sitting with the head cook at the butcher-block table in the center of the room. Aylan had often listened in as her mother helped plan the menus for the family and staff, and reviewed the lists for the week's order of dry goods and meat; now, for the first time, it occurred to her that this might not be normal behavior for a queen. Aylan felt an unexpected surge of pride.

"You know, dear, you didn't have to sneak off for the whole day just to avoid helping me plan this party."

"Oh, er, yeah. Sorry about that."

"But if you *could* give me an hour or so tomorrow to go over a few small details, and have your measurements taken for your birthday dress, that would be marvelous."

"Sure, mom."

"Good."

Aylan turned to leave, relieved that the interview had been comparatively painless.

"Oh, and Aylan?" her mother called again, stopping her short. "One more thing. A package was delivered for you after you wandered off this morning. I think it must be an early birthday present… from *him.* I didn't think you'd want to wait until Thursday to unwrap it, so I had it sent up to your room. It'll be our little secret, ok?"

Aylan laughed. "You mean *you* didn't want to wait until Thursday, right?"

"Well yes, that too."

Aylan shook her head, grinning, and turned back down the corridor. For a moment she quickened her paces so the queen would think she was excited to unwrap her surprise, but once she was safely out of earshot, she slowed again. "I don't give a damn what he's sent me," she muttered. "In fact, I think I'll have it sent back. Or maybe burned. Yes… burned sounds good."

She climbed the stairs to her room and pushed open her door, pleased to find a strong fire already crackling. "That should do the job nicely," she said with a smile. "Now where is it?"

Aylan scanned her room, and froze. The parcel was sitting in the middle of her bed, and it looked unsettlingly familiar. "I've seen that somewhere before," she thought, a chill running down her spine. "But where?" She approached it tentatively, unsure why

the sight of it was causing her such anxiety… until she saw something silvery-blue peeking out from the muslin wrapping. Suddenly, she knew.

"It's Sehra's lost wedding fabric," she whispered, pulling back the cover to reveal the beautiful silk beneath. "I had it just before Gala started screaming at me to run…Ashton must have seen me drop it. That *bastard.* He's trying to scare me."

She whirled toward the fire, determined to throw the whole thing in at once, when a small piece of parchment slipped from the folds of silk and fluttered to the ground. Aylan stared at it. She'd seen Ashton's handwriting before, both in her own letter and in the one he'd sent her father, and this looked nothing like that.

"But if it wasn't Ashton, then who…"

Aylan thrust the silk to the side and dove to retrieve the paper. She read it once, and then again, blinking furiously to clear her eyes of a vision that couldn't possibly be real. The fabric wasn't from Ashton… it was from Garrick.

Aylan,

I saw this in Mylamaire and thought of you. Please accept it as my apology for everything I said that morning; I didn't mean a word of it.

Yours,
Garrick

"Yours, Garrick," she repeated softly aloud. "*My* Garrick." She knew it was just a meaningless way of ending a letter, but right then it felt true. He was her Garrick.

"*Mine.*"

An eager knock at the door abruptly broke her from her reverie.

"Aylan," trilled the queen, "are you going to let me see? I'm just dying to know what he sent you!"

Aylan knew that when her mother was excited, a knock upon the door was merely a formality, but she couldn't bear to throw the note into the fire. Instead, she shoved it beneath the edge of the sheepskin rug at the hearth, and gathered up the bundle of fabric just as her mother burst through the door.

"Oh!" cooed the queen when she spotted the blue silk. "Oh, Aylan, you'll look gorgeous in this! How in the world did you find a man with such exquisite taste?"

"He's pretty perfect, isn't he?" sighed Aylan with a smile.

"I just can't wait to meet him. Did he send a note? Is it as sweet as the one he sent your father?"

"Umm, no, there wasn't any note. Just the fabric."

"Don't be silly, I'm sure I saw… *oh*. Ok, then," she said with a knowing smile. "No need to share your love letters with your mother."

Aylan squirmed. "I'm being serious, mom. No note."

"Of course, dear. If you say there was no note, then I believe you."

She clearly didn't.

"Anyway, we simply must have your birthday gown made with this. You'll look stunning in it; I'm sure he'll hardly be able to keep his eyes off you."

"He's coming to the party?"

"He is! We received his message while you were out this afternoon. Your father sent the invitation after he received the engagement note, bless him. Otherwise it probably wouldn't have reached Ashton in time."

"How lucky," Aylan replied flatly.

"Isn't it, though? So it will be Ashton, Liam, Cole, Gunner, Gala, Lily, Marisol, Olivia, Rafaela, you of course, plus your father and I, a few cousins, and the usual mix of local dignitaries and gentry. Let's see, am I missing anyone? What about that Garrick fellow that Liam kept mentioning at breakfast? Should we invite him?"

Aylan nearly choked. "He's Olivia's twin brother, and, no, mom, I don't think we need to invite him."

"Are you feeling alright? You look a bit pale all of a sudden."

"Oh… I think the trip is finally catching up with me, that's all."

"Well, perhaps I'll have your dinner sent up, and then Henriette can draw a nice bath for you. How does that sound?"

Aylan smiled. "That sounds great, thank you."

"Of course sweetheart. You just rest." The queen stood to go, but paused and reached down to stroke Aylan's cheek with the back of her hand. "My little girl," she sighed. "My little girl all grown up and beginning to make her own way in the world. Oh Aylan, if you only knew how proud I am of you. You're becoming such a fine woman."

"Thank you," Aylan whispered, choking back tears.

The queen tweaked her nose affectionately and bustled out of the room, leaving Aylan all alone.

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Aylan sat in the tub long after the steaming water had turned cool and the suds had disappeared. She knew there was a warm fire and fur-trimmed robe waiting in her bedroom, but she couldn't bring herself to move. The cold water was punishment for what she knew she had to do: she had to tell Garrick that she was engaged to Ashton, and that she couldn't see him anymore. Her heart was split between hoping he would care, and hoping he would not. Perhaps their afternoon together hadn't really changed anything at all.

But it had. It had changed everything.

Grimly she thought how serendipitous her choice for their meeting place had been. It was a place where she'd have no choice but to say those words. A place where there were no secrets.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Garrick paced back and forth across the faded rug of the small room he'd taken at the local inn. He was giddy with anticipation; according to the clock, he had only a few more minutes to wait. Never in his life had he felt such a sense of clarity. He would tell Olivia she was wrong — that he was *sure* she was wrong — and he'd find a way to convince her that he was right.

His sister would be happy at last, and he'd get to be with Aylan.

From the moment he'd realized how simple it all was, he'd been desperate to see Aylan again. Of course, he couldn't share everything with her, not right away. But someday he'd tell her all of it, the whole tale, and she'd laugh at all the torture he'd put himself through. He loved the way she laughed.

Another glance at the clock: it was two minutes until midnight. Garrick stretched luxuriantly, and removed his nightshirt

in anticipation of the change. At the last instant he shoved a high-back chair against the window sash as well, ensuring it'd stay open. After all, it'd be a shame to wait so long only to find himself a prisoner in his own room.

Garrick smiled as the clock on the mantelpiece began to chime. He felt the familiar sensation of the floor rushing up to greet him, and his body collapsing in upon itself. It was done. Garrick leapt up to the window sill and out into the darkness, the last chiming note of the clock still hanging in the quiet night air.

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Garrick sniffed the salty air outside the palace. In his human form, with his frail human senses, he'd never have noticed the fragrant symphony all around him, but he had hours to go before the rising sun returned him to his natural body. He sifted through the damp scents of sea and sand, the earthy notes of nearby horses, the sweetness of the honeysuckle trailing up the castle's stone walls, and concentrated on the delicate notes of lemon and lavender that even his weak human nose would now recognize anywhere. He followed the trail of perfume to the foot of a tall tower with a balcony facing the sea.

That must be her room.

A knotty poplar growing alongside the tower made for a convenient ladder, and Garrick padded down upon the smooth stone of the balcony's balustrade in less time than it would have taken him to climb a flight of stairs.

For a moment he savored the sight before him: the arched doors to her room that were thrown open to welcome the cool night air, the sheer billowing fabric of her drapes backlit by the

glowing embers of a slowly dying fire, the hazy form of a canopied bed. Though there had been many such nights when he'd been drawn to her window at school to watch her sleep, tonight was different. Before, he'd come because he was troubled by the unpleasant sensation of a mind at war with a heart. He'd convinced himself that if he looked at her long enough, he'd discover the source of her hold on him, and be able to break it.

Those days were over. Now he just wanted to see the face of the woman he was sure he was falling in love with.

Silent on his padded paws, Garrick crept up to the filmy drapery and peeked beneath it. The fire at the opposite end of the room was nearly out, casting only a muted glow over the darkened space. In the center of the room was her bed, heavy in its ornate four-post style, but draped in the same gauzy fabric that curtained the doorway. Her hand was visible at the edge of the bed, long fingers curled lightly over the corner of the mattress. He could hear her breathing, deep and even; Aylan was fast asleep.

Garrick whispered across the floor, ears perked and alert, ready to run for cover at the slightest noise. He knew he shouldn't approach the bed, but her breath came in slow, measured intervals, and her hands were still… and he hadn't come all this way to look at a dust ruffle. Gingerly, he raised first one paw and then the other to the edge of her mattress, stretching his body as tall as it would go. It was just enough that his eyes cleared the height of the bed, and he found himself staring into her sleeping face, inches from his own.

"She's gorgeous," he thought, taking in her sleep-softened features. The normally unruly cascade of her hair was pulled into a loose braid, allowing him an unobstructed view of the curve of her jaw, and the smooth planes of her cheek. She had freckles, he

noticed, but just barely, and her lashes were exceptionally long. *I could spend forever looking at this girl.*

So fascinated was he by the nuances of her face, he didn't notice when her fingers began to flex, or when the cadence of her breathing altered. He didn't even notice when her eyes fluttered open, absorbed as he was in that particular moment with the perfect bow shape of her upper lip, and the memory of kissing it. It was only when she drew a startled gasp through those same pretty lips that Garrick snapped out of his reverie, and did the exact thing he knew he should avoid doing at all cost: he looked Aylan straight in the eyes.

For a moment she was frozen, locked onto his green stare with stunned silence.

And then she screamed.

Garrick backpedaled frantically and made a dash for cover beneath the slipcover of the chair at her desk. His heart was pounding wildly. "Stupid, stupid mistake," he chastised himself. "What were you thinking?"

When the sound of blood raging in his ears finally ceased, Garrick realized that Aylan had stopped screaming. Knowing her as he was beginning to know her, that made him extremely nervous. *She's probably standing out there with a fire poker, ready to bash my skull the minute I come out.* He couldn't help a wide grin at that terrifying idea. "My girl doesn't need to yell for help," he thought, with discordant pride.

Several minutes passed without the slightest sound to hint at her doings. Finally, Garrick couldn't stand it any longer. He peeped out from beneath the cover, muscles tensed for evasive maneuvers.

Aylan hadn't moved an inch.

She was in the same startled pose, half raised upon one arm, staring intently at the chair, waiting for him to emerge.

"I'm sorry, cat," she murmured when he finally appeared. "I didn't mean to frighten you. Come out of there and let me see you."

Garrick eyed her suspiciously, and stayed put.

"Don't be scared," she said, reaching her arm out. "Come here. Let me pet you."

Garrick's ears perked up. He'd never been petted before. Not that he'd ever wanted to be — he found the whole idea rather humiliating — but this was Aylan offering, and that was something else entirely. He stole a quick glance toward the hearth to make sure the fire poker was right where it should be, and then took a tentative step forward.

"That's it," Aylan soothed, her braid tumbling forward over her shoulder as she stretched her body further over the edge of the bed toward him. Her voice was practically a purr, and outrageously seductive. Garrick found her impossible to resist.

He padded forward, knowing with with every fiber of his being that he should turn around and leave, and knowing with just as much certainty that he wouldn't. As soon as he was within her reach, Aylan scooped him up and set him down on the bed beside her. She scratched behind his ears and stroked her fingers between his shoulder blades and down his back.

"See now, isn't this better than hiding under that chair?"

So. Much. Better.

"You're a sweet little thing," she cooed, as he rubbed his forehead against her arms in the most cat-like way he knew how. "I wonder if you have a name? You look awfully well fed so you must belong to someone. Are you lost?"

Garrick tried to mew his offense at her comment, but since she accompanied it with a luxurious rubbing of his belly, his heart wasn't really in the protest. He cuddled in closer and licked the underside of her wrist as she scratched him. Aylan smiled.

"So you've decided you like me then?"

"Like you? Right now I think I love you," Garrick thought. Suddenly he stopped. *Wait… do I?*

"Well I like you too," Aylan continued. "And I'm glad you're here, I needed a snuggle tonight. Today was… so many things."

Keep talking. Tell me about your day.

"I wish I could cut out the beginning and end of today, and just live in the middle forever."

Me too. The middle of today was perfect.

"The middle of today was perfect."

The end of it is turning out pretty great, too.

"…and the crazy thing is, I already miss him."

I'm here, beautiful girl. I already missed you, too. Garrick licked her hand; it was a poor substitute for kissing her.

"You look a lot like him, do you know that?" she asked.

Garrick froze.

"Not that he looks like a cat, of course, but your fur is the exact color of his hair. It's almost black, but not quite. And your *eyes.* I've never seen eyes like his, except of course on his sister. But now here they are on you. It's like looking into the center of a perfect green emerald."

Garrick was alarmed at how close Aylan was getting to the truth. His eyes, which he'd always been rather proud of despite their being the mark of a curse, had suddenly become an enormous liability.

I need to get out of here.

He got up and stretched, trying not to seem in a hurry. When that was done, he nuzzled her arm a few more times for good measure, and then edged his paw toward the side of the bed in preparation for his leap to the ground.

"No, don't go," Aylan murmured when she realized what he was doing. "Stay with me."

She gently pulled him against her.

I can't.

He knew he needed to go, but with her warm body pressed to his like that, it was suddenly getting a lot harder to feel the proper sense of urgency.

"Please stay with me," she whispered. "Please?"

And that did it.

Garrick knew that even if he wanted to, he'd never be able to deny her anything she asked of him in that sweet, sleepy voice. Aylan nuzzled her face into the fur between his shoulder blades and inhaled deeply.

"You smell nice," she whispered, the words slightly slurred. "Not like a stray cat at all. You smell like…"

She didn't continue the thought, but pulled him closer.

"Just for an hour," Garrick thought to himself. "She'll be asleep again soon; I can stay with her for an hour. Or maybe two hours. But then I'll go…"

He allowed himself to shut his eyes and revel in the sensation of being in her bed, in her arms. For several minutes he listened to the tenor of her breathing as she slipped off into sleep, and then:

"Garrick," she murmured against his fur.

For a moment he was certain he'd been found out, but he realized quickly that she wasn't talking to him anymore, not really. Aylan was whispering his name to whatever vision of him she was seeing in her dreams.

Hugely satisfied, he snuggled in closer, and for the very first time in all his life, Prince Garrick began to purr.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Click, click, click, click…

Garrick shifted his head, trying to shut out the annoying noise coming from somewhere in the hotel, but it seemed to fill his entire room.

Click, click, click, click…

"What *is* that?" he wondered groggily. "The sun is barely up, what could they possibly be doing?"

He tried to bury his head deeper into the soft warmth of the bed, but his pillow seemed to shift beneath him of its own accord, and as it did, he heard a second noise: a sleepy whimpering, followed by what felt like the flexing of fingers in his hair. Garrick's eyes flew open.

Oh, no.

He wasn't at the inn.

He was in Aylan's room, in Aylan's bed, and the early morning sun had rendered him human once more. Human, and completely naked.

Oh, NO.

Garrick forced himself to stay still as a wave of panic washed over him. A small part of his mind registered the fact that Aylan was still asleep, but that she couldn't possibly stay that way much longer… not with that wretched clicking getting louder by the minute.

Seriously, what is *that noise? Doesn't matter. I need to get out of here. Fast.*

Garrick closed his eyes and assessed the situation. His head, he realized, was still nestled in the spot against her side where his entire body had fit so comfortably the night before. He could feel her hand tangled lightly in his hair, but the rest of his body was angled away from her toward the edge of the bed. Aylan murmured again — a slurring noise that sounded like his name.

If I don't get out of this bed in the next thirty seconds before she wakes up, it'll be over between us, because there is literally no believable way to explain this. If I'm going to do something, it has to be now.

Ever so gently, Garrick slid his leg across the mattress until his heel found the edge of the bed. He anchored it there, and used the leverage to swing the rest of his body around without moving his head, until both of his feet were on the ground. He now found himself in an awkward sort of backbend, with his body arched over the bed and his head at a strange angle still tucked under Aylan's arm. He took a deep breath and planted his feet. What he was about to do would wake her up without question, so he had to be fast.

One… two… three.

Garrick exhaled and forced himself up, swinging forward at the waist. His feet stayed firmly on the ground while the rest of his body arced upward into a standing position and then forward, dropping him to the ground at the side of the bed. He caught himself with his arms, allowing his elbows to bend and absorb his weight. As soon as he was on the floor he rolled toward the bed, and within two seconds of that initial breath, Garrick was safely concealed. For the second time in less than twelve hours, he found himself hiding from Aylan beneath a piece of furniture, with only a swath of fabric standing between himself and catastrophe.

Overhead he heard the rustling of sheets. "Cat?" Aylan called. "Are you still here?"

"No," he thought, "I'm gone. In fact, I was never here; you dreamt the whole thing."

Her feet padded down on the carpet, inches from his face. Garrick felt as if the surge of adrenaline coursing through him would cause his heart to explode in his chest.

"Cat, are you hiding under the chair again?"

"No, please don't look for me," he pleaded silently.

Her feet disappeared from view. Garrick scuttled back as far as he could, praying there'd be enough darkness to conceal him when she inevitably looked under the bed. He knew it was a foolish hope.

"Here kitty kitty," she called. "I know you must be in here somewhere. Come out and let's get breakfast."

More rustling of fabric as she swept aside the drapes, and then her feet came into view once more.

"Are you under here?"

Garrick saw her fingertips grasp the bottom of the dust ruffle, and the curling tail of her braid as she knelt down. He

resisted the urge to close his eyes; he wasn't about to suffer the double humiliation of not being able to face her when she found him. Her chin and mouth came into view as she bent her head down…

Well, it was nice knowing you.

"Cat? Is that you?"

Suddenly, the bedroom door flew open with a bang, and Aylan tumbled backward in alarm.

"What in the world are you doing on the floor?" shrieked a female voice. "Why aren't you dressed for breakfast? I think your father should demand a refund from that school and keep you home with me; I would surely teach you better!"

"Good lord, Henry! I know you aren't keen on knocking, but do you have to burst in here like the whole castle is on fire?"

"I most certainly do. Though between your endless spying, and your rolling around on the floor, even that might not be enough anymore. Perhaps I'll move my own bed up here so that I can keep an eye on you from sun up to sun down."

"Don't be ridiculous, I wasn't rolling around on the floor," laughed Aylan. "And I obviously wasn't spying; the castle isn't even open! I was just looking for a cat. I think he's under the bed."

"Nonsense, there's no cat in here."

"But there is! I saw him last night."

"Oh you mean that mangy old black cat?"

"Hey, who are you calling mangy?" thought Garrick.

"You saw him?" asked Aylan.

"One of the maids who checks your fire let him out last night. He was pawing at the door."

What in the world is she talking about? No one let me out.

"And you shouldn't have cats in your room anyway," added Henry, in a voice that seemed far too loud to be directed only at Aylan. "It's extremely inappropriate!"

"Inappropriate? Henry, it was just a *cat*. It's not like I had a boy in here."

"Good thing. A boy in your room would have your father's entire armed guard to deal with if he were caught."

"Seriously, why are you talking so loud? I'm right here; no need to shout."

"Nonsense, I'm speaking in a perfectly normal tone," said Henry, in a perfectly normal tone at last. "Now up you go, off the floor. Your mother's couturier has been waiting to take your measurements for an hour now, and we'll not keep her waiting another minute."

"But the cat —

"I don't care about the cat. Up. Now."

"Ok, ok. Geez, when did you get so bossy?" Aylan muttered as she stood. Garrick watched her feet pad away from the bed, and in another moment he heard the click of the door shutting. He couldn't believe his luck.

"I have no idea who you are, Henry," he whispered, "But when I meet you I'm going to kiss you right on your bossy mouth."

He pulled himself forward and peeked out from beneath the dust ruffle. Everything was quiet… except, of course, for the relentless clicking. Garrick scanned what he could see of the room, looking for anything that might help him. There was the desk and chair he'd hidden under last night, a case full of books, and a giant ornate wardrobe no doubt full of hundreds of dresses. "It'd be nice if you kept something useful up here," he grumbled. "Like a rope ladder maybe. Would a rope ladder be too much to ask?"

Suddenly Garrick felt an unexpected tapping on his shoulder. He yelped and scrambled backward again, expecting to find the tip of a spear pointing at him when he turned to look. Instead, he found himself staring at the pale face of a tiny wooden doll.

"What in the world?" He reached forward with a finger extended to poke the doll, but just as he was about to, she raised her arm and smacked his hand away.

Garrick gasped and snatched his hand back. "That's not possible," he whispered. "Dolls can't move."

The doll put her hands pointedly on her hips, and Garrick scrambled back further. The doll's shoulders began to silently shake.

"Excuse me, are you *laughing* at me?" asked Garrick, eyeing the dark-haired figure warily.

The doll nodded her head in the affirmative.

"I don't see anything funny about this situation, personally."

She covered her mouth, but her shoulders shook harder.

"Seriously, you're being very rude. We'll see who's laughing when your wind-up mechanism runs out."

Finally the doll composed herself and gestured toward the far side of the bed, waving her hand as if he should follow her.

"You want me to go that way? Why, is there a rope ladder over there? Cause I could use one."

She shook her head, and gestured harder.

"Look, you're an impressive piece of engineering, but honestly, I don't have time for this right now. I'm trying to figure out how to get out of this castle alive… and preferably with some shred of dignity."

The doll stamped her foot and pointed insistently to the other side of the bed again, refusing to take 'no' for an answer.

"Ok, fine," said Garrick. "But if I wind up dead because I wasted time taking orders from a little doll… well that's gonna be really embarrassing."

He turned and shimmied in the other direction, scooting forward until he had a clear view of the far side of her room. The only notable object he could see was an enormous dollhouse, presumably modeled after the Charming Castle.

"That?" he asked skeptically. "That's what you wanted to show me?"

The doll nodded.

"Well it's lovely. But not particularly helpful… wait, did you just roll your eyes at me?"

The doll nodded again, and then began walking toward the castle, her feet making tiny clicking noises as they tapped across the floor.

"You're seriously the rudest doll I ever met," Garrick muttered. "If I end up in the dungeon, you're coming with me."

The doll ignored him, and made her way to the castle's gilded main door, where she pressed a tiny latch at the hinge. Suddenly the entire stone face of the castle slid to the left, revealing its lavish interior. Garrick gasped. It was unlike anything he'd ever seen before.

Miniature figures were moving all throughout the model castle. Maids were stripping bed sheets and scrubbing floors, a cook was stirring something in a copper kettle that was actually steaming, and in one of the upper rooms stood a tiny Aylan, surrounded by bolts of fabric, while another dolled fussed with dress-form nearby.

"This is where all the clicking was coming from," Garrick whispered. "And this is what Aylan meant when she said she wasn't spying… So if the dollhouse really shows what's happening in the castle at this exact moment, I could find the best way out… and watch to see when the coast is clear."

It didn't solve the problem of his nudity, but it was a start. Garrick's eyes jumped to the uppermost level of the castle, searching for the tower room with the canopy bed draped in white. It was easy to spot, because it was the only bedroom that had a very recognizable face peering out from under its bed.

"There's a doll version of *me*? How is that even possible?"

He stretched his hand out and waved his arm back and forth, and the black-haired doll did the same. Garrick groaned. "No matter how long I live, this will stand as the weirdest day of my life. And I've only been awake an hour."

With a sigh, Garrick hauled himself out from under the bed and crossed the room, refusing to watch his tiny naked counterpart do the same. Just as he approached the castle to examine it more closely, the dark-haired doll bustled into the dollhouse-version of Aylan's room, and waved at the miniature Garrick.

"Well don't just stand there like an idiot," Garrick snapped at him. "Cover yourself up or something, at least!" He watched his doppelgänger stand dumbly for a moment, before realizing what needed to be done. "Ugh, he's only gonna move when I do."

Garrick hurried back to Aylan's bed and yanked off the sheet. He wrapped it around his waist, and watched with relief as his little counterpart did the same. The dark-haired doll seemed to be laughing again, but Garrick ignored her. "Alright" he said, "show me what to do."

The doll composed herself and began walking toward Aylan's salt-box sized wardrobe.

"You've got to be kidding," said Garrick when he realized her intention. "Your grand solution to my problem is to try to sneak out of here wearing one of Aylan's ball gowns? Because *that's* not completely humiliating or anything."

The doll shook her head, and Garrick couldn't tell if she was answering his question or expressing her exasperation. She glanced back one more time at the doll-version of Garrick, and then climbed into the wardrobe and disappeared from view.

"There better be a secret passage in there or something," Garrick muttered. He crossed the room and pulled open the carved doors of Aylan's giant wardrobe. As expected, it was brimming with elegant dresses. "Even if any of these were my size," he called, "I don't think any are my color."

There was no answer.

"Hello? Is anyone in there?"

Silence.

Garrick sighed, and stepped into the wardrobe. "I can't believe I'm wasting time on this," he muttered. He parted the dresses, and pushed back as far into the wardrobe as he could go. As he slid the furthest of the hangers forward, the back wall of the wardrobe was revealed… and it was just as solid as the rest of the piece. There was definitely no secret door. "I knew it. That stupid doll is going to get me killed."

He turned to make his way out again, and as he turned, his eyes fell on something he hadn't noticed before. The garment on the very last hanger wasn't a gown at all, it was a set of well-worn men's trousers and shirt, presumably the same ones Aylan had

worn while taking her illicit riding lessons. Garrick felt a surge of affection in his chest.

"Oh Aylan," he whispered. "How could I ever love anyone else but you?"

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The trail grew steadily narrower as it climbed higher into the forest, so that by the time Aylan reached the wing-shaped boulder near its summit, she was crowded by bright autumn foliage on all sides. She stared at the huge fallen stone that marked the end of the trail and served as a gateway to the clearing beyond. Garrick was somewhere behind that rock… or he wasn't.

"Did you bewitch him along with my horse," she whispered, turning one of the sapphires at her throat, "or was all of it real?" She'd spent her entire hike trying to decide which answer she preferred, but it was useless. She hated what she'd come to do, yet she couldn't find it in her heart to hope that Garrick wouldn't be there to meet her.

"I guess now we'll see whether he meant it, or whether it was magic. You'll help me face it either way, right?" She glanced down at the necklace, expecting a reassuring burst of warmth, but

the stones remained coldly indifferent. "Thanks," she muttered, rolling her eyes. "I'm so glad you're here."

Aylan took a deep breath and squared her shoulders, then ducked and shimmied under the stone as gracefully as she could manage. When she emerged on the other side, she straightened, blinking in the sudden sunlight… and there he was.

Garrick was leaning against a silver birch at the far edge of the clearing, staring up at the dappled sky above. He wore a simple white shirt, enticingly open at the neck, and his hair was pushed back from his face as if, in his haste to leave for their meeting, he'd abandoned the nearly-black waves to their own will rather than that of his comb. Aylan had never seen him look so devastatingly handsome.

After a moment he sensed her presence, and lowered his eyes from the sky. When they met hers he inhaled deeply and smiled, and the smile was tinted with relief. "I missed you," he said. The easy certainty in his voice made Aylan's heart skip wildly.

"I missed you too," she answered, unable to lie.

And then, without knowing how it happened, Aylan found herself in his arms, unsure if she'd stepped forward first or if he'd come to her.

"Aylan," he breathed against her neck, "this is going to be a problem. How will I ever have enough of you if I can't even make it through a single night without missing you?"

Aylan felt a sob rising in her throat as her heart splintered, nearly breaking. It had only been a day — just one perfect day — and now it had to end. "I'd recognize you as my match even without a magic book to tell me so," she thought. "Even though you'll never be mine… you'll always be mine. And I'll always be yours."

"Aylan, what are you thinking?" asked Garrick softly after a moment. "You look so far away."

"I have something I need to tell you. Something I don't think you'll like."

"What is it?"

Aylan looked him in the eye, but just as she opened her mouth to answer, she felt an intense surge of heat at her throat. The gemstones she'd implored for help had come alive, burning her, and burning away everything she'd been about to say. She gasped as the searing heat melted down through her skin, filling her throat with hungry flames, but by then they weren't flames they were words, the words that needed to be said more urgently than anything else:

"Garrick, I know it sounds crazy. I know it *is* crazy. But I — I think I'm in love with you."

His face split into a wide grin. "My sweet, beautiful girl," he murmured. "How could you possibly think that was something I would not like to hear? Can't you tell that I am in love with you, too?" And then his lips were on hers, the fire in her mouth engulfing them both. A part of her tried to resist, to push back against the heat, to remember what else needed to be said — but he pulled her closer, and the flames surrounded them, and in a moment Aylan was certain they'd melted together into a single being. Was this really what the first Aylan and Garrick had given up on? It didn't seem possible…

And then, with the tiny piece of her mind not wholly overcome, Aylan remembered Gala.

Gala, the friend who knew her the best, who loved her the most, who'd risked her most carefully guarded secret to pull her out of harm's way. Gala, who was magically bound to uphold the

promise Aylan had made to Ashton. Gala, who would have to make the choice between fighting for that promise, or risking her own life, should Aylan decide to walk away.

With a force of will she wouldn't have thought herself capable of, Aylan gently pulled back. Garrick loosened his hold on her willingly, but only enough so that he could see her face. His own was flushed, pupils huge in his unearthly green eyes.

"Wow," he stuttered, his breath ragged. "Did you feel that too?"

It was exactly the opening she needed.

"Let's go to the place I told you about. There's so much more I need to tell you."

"Ok," he answered, allowing her to pull him forward. He looked a bit stunned.

"Just wait," thought Aylan glumly. "My necklace may be of no help, but at least I still have the flowers."

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After a few moments of silence, Garrick was able to collect himself, and reached for Aylan's hand. He instantly felt a golden warmth spread across his palm where their skin touched. "So where are we going?" he asked. "Is it very far?"

"Just a quarter of a mile or so, maybe less," answered Aylan. "There's an abandoned cottage built into a cliff face at the bottom of the ravine. It's just beyond this clearing. They say a witch once lived there, and that the garden surrounding it is enchanted."

Garrick was intrigued. "What makes the garden so special?"

"Well, the flowers there bloom year-round. Big white blossoms so thick it looks like the garden is filled with snow. But they aren't just any flowers."

"No?"

"No. The flowers know all the secrets you're keeping, and whisper them aloud."

Garrick froze. "Aylan, be serious."

"I am being serious. That's the legend anyways."

"And have you experienced this for yourself?"

"I've seen the flowers; they're as beautiful in December as they are in June."

"And the other part?" he pressed.

"No, I told you, I only ever go there alone. Obviously I can't keep secrets from myself. So I don't know if they really whisper."

"Oh," answered Garrick feebly. *Of course those damn flowers will whisper. And why not? Enchanted doll houses, face-melting kisses, talking flowers… These are just the normal sorts of things that happen around this girl.*

Garrick mentally catalogued all the secrets he had for the flowers to tell. The curse that turned him into a cat every night was the biggest, of course, but there were many more: the fact that he'd spent most of his life actively despising her… his role in Olivia's plan to seduce Liam… his most recent evening spent shamelessly curled up in her bed, and his naked banishment beneath it… It was all way too much. He needed to find a reason to change their course, and fast.

Think, think, think, he demanded of his brain. The sky above them was irritatingly clear and the sun was nowhere near its apex, so no chance of worry over the weather or a need to get back before lunch could interrupt Aylan's plans. "Why in the world

would she even want to go to a place like that?" he wondered. "Doesn't matter. We're not going. Think."

He noticed that Aylan seemed even more absorbed in her thoughts than he was in his. He squeezed her hand, marveling again at the burst of warmth. "You ok?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm fine. It's just —

"Watch out!" He pulled her elbow, yanking her out of the way of a root that had snaked up from the packed dirt of the path, just waiting to trip a heedless hiker. "Well look at that," Garrick said with a grin, as he held her against him. "I've finally rescued you from something."

"My hero," she said, smiling up at him. "Although, that root is barely an inch out of the ground. There's a high probability I'd have just stepped right over it without incident."

"Or you might have twisted your ankle, forcing me to carry you home on my back, and prompting all sorts of wildly uncomfortable questions from your parents. One or the other."

"'Wildly uncomfortable' is probably the understatement of the year," said Aylan. "Luckily, I'm safe."

"Thanks to me."

"Yes, thanks to you."

"I definitely deserve a kiss."

"If I start kissing you, we'll both get distracted and then we'll never get where we're going."

"Really?" asked Garrick hopefully. He bent and kissed her just below her ear.

"Really," answered Aylan, shivering as his lips skimmed the side of her neck. "So knock it off." She planted a chaste kiss on his cheek and tugged at his hand to keep walking.

"Someone's on a mission," Garrick thought. His curiosity to discover why she seemed so determined to get to the flower garden almost outweighed his own determination *not* to get there. Almost. The kissing hadn't worked, but he had another idea that would. *Too bad it's going to be completely humiliating.*

He waited until they came to a particularly rocky bit of path. Aylan hadn't taken a fall, but that didn't mean he couldn't. He looked sideways at her, and couldn't help but smile at the far-away look on her face. A shaft of sunlight had cut through a break in the canopy, covering her golden hair in sparkle. "She's worth it," he thought.

He took a deep breath, and then:

"*OWW*!" he bellowed, grabbing his ankle and hopping on one foot. "*Son. Of. A… Owww*!"

Aylan jumped, pulled from her musings by his sudden outburst, but unfortunately, she wasn't the only one startled. Several finches nesting in the shrubbery by the path were even more alarmed than she, and in a burst of bright feathers they evacuated their dwelling by the single most expeditious route: the one that went straight by Garrick's face. Unaware that he'd been the cause of their uproar, Garrick flailed his arms at the feathery melee, believing he was the target of a hostile avian assault. This did not please the finches one bit. Chaos ensued.

And then disaster struck.

Between hopping and bellowing and flailing, Garrick had very little attention left to pay to the path in front of him, or the enormous root peeking up from it. His "good" foot lodged in the gap beneath the root, sending him headlong toward the packed earth. He tried to catch his weight with his arms, but the speed of his fall was too great; his forehead struck the rocky ground with a

crunch. Pain radiated up from his trapped ankle in hot waves, and for several seconds Garrick saw stars. And finches.

"*Damn finches,*" he moaned.

It had taken exactly thirty seconds for his plan to go horribly wrong.

"Garrick!" shrieked Aylan, dropping to his side. "Are you ok?"

"My foot," he gasped.

She dove to free it. Garrick gritted his teeth as she worked and then turned himself over.

"You know you could have warned me that the birds in your country are totally *insane*."

"Sure, sure, let's blame the itty-bitty finches." Aylan teased.

"It was like forty-seven-thousand versus one. The finches fight dirty."

Aylan smiled. "I think it was more like ten. Maybe eleven. Seriously though, are you ok? That was a nasty fall."

"I'm fine, I just need… a minute…" His words dissolved into pain as a second wave hit him, this time beginning in his forehead and temporarily erasing the agony of his ankle from his immediate consciousness. He gasped as the light behind Aylan suddenly became painfully bright; her face swam in his vision and then began to fade. Garrick shut his eyes and resisted the urge to vomit. "Just… give me… a minute," he managed to stutter.

And then the world went black.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

For the third night in a row, Gala found herself floating listlessly up and down the school's gallery of paintings. She found it odd that she should feel even more guilt in Aylan's absence than in her presence. Without her friend's constant reassurances to the contrary, Gala became convinced that the flaw in her nature that commanded her to keep and uphold a promise she found repulsive was somehow her fault. She should have refused. She shouldn't have cowered. And yet, the other part of her nature, the part that could see what was hidden, knew that Ashton's threats were not empty ones. He really did have the capacity to hurt her, or even to kill her.

And I'm letting my best friend marry *him! How could I do such a thing?*

And yet, how could she not? Gala could see no way out of her predicament. No way to repent what she'd done, and no way to

escape what she was. And since there was nothing else to do, Gala floated. Up and down, up and down, pausing each time she passed the portrait of Rapunzel DeByron. When she hovered in front of that particular painting, she felt the very faintest stirrings of hope. She was convinced that if there was an answer, Rapunzel must know it, but so far, Rapunzel wasn't talking.

However, on that third night, someone else was.

The portrait of Aylan's great-great-grandmother was situated directly across the gallery from a shallow alcove, and on the right wall of that alcove was the door leading to Olivia's suite. The two were separated in the middle by a grand marble sculpture of an open-winged Pegasus, so neither was visible to the other. It was for this reason that the messenger who approached Olivia's room that night did not think to soften his speech when he told her what he knew; the castle was silent and Gala was concealed by the statue and the darkness — there was no reason to suppose anyone was about.

He knocked gently upon her door once, and was answered immediately; he'd obviously been expected.

"Well?" hissed Olivia without prelude. "What have you learned?"

"You were right in your suspicion. My sources say he left the home of the earl early Monday morning, and has not been seen there since. I've also had word from the city; your brother appeared at the Charming palace later that same morning, though he did not present himself to the royal family. He delivered a package, then left."

"What was in the package?"

"According to my sources in the palace, Prince Garrick brought a large quantity of fine silk and requested that it be delivered to Princess Aylan."

"But he didn't see her?"

"Of that I'm not certain. Prince Garrick left immediately after making his delivery, and he never stated his name; it was only by chance that anyone there recognized him at all. If not for those dazzling eyes you two share… well, let's just say they could not be mistaken."

Olivia nodded. "Go on."

"As I said, he left, and I've had no word of where he may have gone. But I do know that the princess also left the palace that morning, presumably before Garrick arrived, and could not be accounted for for several hours following."

"You've done well," said Olivia, without emotion. She pulled two gold pieces from her pocket and placed them in his palm. "Please let me know if you discover anything more. It is imperative that I know where my brother has gone."

"Princess, I've not yet said all. I know where your brother is now, but not how he got there."

Olivia pressed her lips into a thin grimace. "Well?"

"He is back at the Charming palace. I only know that he arrived there sometime late this afternoon, and under mysterious circumstances. The family has him in the care of their personal staff. These people are, well, quite circumspect. Not the sort that would be persuaded to gossip by an extra bit of silver. I've been unable to learn anything other than that."

"I see."

"Of course, if you just gave me more time, there are always ways…"

Olivia held up her hand to silence him. "It's no matter. I'll be traveling to the Charming palace myself the day after tomorrow. You've told me everything I need to know."

The messenger bowed deeply. "If there is ever anything else you require…"

Olivia tossed a third gold piece to the floor. "You and I never spoke," she said curtly, before turning and shutting her door firmly in his face.

Gala peeped out from behind the wing of the pegasus and watched as the messenger collected his gold and scurried off in the direction of the servants' quarters. When he was out of sight, she floated down from where she'd been hovering, and stared at Olivia's door.

"Why is she having Garrick watched?" Gala murmured. "And why should she care if he wants to see Aylan? Unless…"

All of a sudden, an overwhelming compulsion hit Gala with a force that nearly left her breathless. She had to find out what Olivia was up to, and help however she could. Whatever the reason, Olivia wanted Garrick away from Aylan. "If you want to do the dirty work for me," she whispered, "I'm certainly glad to help you along."

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In another town, miles from where Gala was listening at Olivia's door, another figure ventured from her bed and into the darkness.

Aylan was too troubled by everything that had happened to even consider sleeping. At that precise moment, Garrick was stretched upon a bed in a room only a few steps from her own. The

story she'd given her parents had been believable, but even so, she'd not been allowed to tend to him. That job had been given to Henriette, and was a disturbingly easy one, for Garrick had yet to regain consciousness.

A watchman had been assigned to stand guard outside her door, presumably on call to fetch anything Henriette might need to nurse her patient throughout the night, but Aylan knew the truth: he was there to prevent any funny business, real or rumored, from occurring while she and Garrick slept with only a wall between them… and his presence was completely unnecessary.

Aylan didn't want to be anywhere near Garrick.

In fact, she wished nothing more than to be miles and miles away from him — at least until she could tend to a matter of utmost urgency. That was the mission that led her from her bed and into the night.

Getting past the guard took nothing more than patience. She watched the dollhouse until she saw the head of his miniature counterpart drop to its chest, and after fifteen minutes without so much as a shudder from the doll, Aylan was quite certain that the real life version must also be soundly asleep. She wrapped herself in a deep gray cloak and crept silently from her room.

The castle was perfectly still as Aylan veered into a stone passageway off the main corridor that led from the royal residence down to a narrow, protected strip of beach behind the underground armory. It was meant as an escape route for the king and his family should the castle fall under siege, but as far as Aylan knew, it had never been used.

At the end of the tunnel were two heavy wooden doors. The first led to the armory, the second to the sea. Aylan pulled an iron key from her pocket and fitted it into the lock on the former.

The door gave way with a sigh, and Aylan slipped inside. The room was dark, and eerie with the sound of waves crashing near its outer wall. A shaft of torchlight from the passage fell on a wall of shelves filled with battle helmets, and the glint of fire made the metal faces seem to come alive. Aylan felt the stares of hundreds of hollow black eye sockets following her as she crossed the room.

She reached a long rack of bows, selected one, and strung it tight. Tonight, accuracy didn't matter; she cared only for distance. When her bow was ready, she chose a single arrow and then turned and left the armory. One shot was all she'd need.

Aylan pushed open the second door and was hit with a rush of wind blowing in from the sea. She marched the twenty yards to the water as proud as if she were walking the aisle of a cathedral on her wedding day. The surf broke against her toes, and still she pushed forward. The sea was rough, swirling and angry as it dragged against her nightgown, but Aylan continued until she was submerged to her hips. When she was as far as she could safely go, she reached into her pocket and pulled out the sapphire necklace.

"You nearly killed him," she accused the glittering pile in her palm. "I know that what happened in the woods wasn't an accident. I said aloud where we were going — you knew I meant to tell him the truth once we got there — and rather than allow it, you hurt him. But I'm going to end this once and for all. You wanted me to admit that I love him, and so against my will, I did. And now, watch me *prove* that I love him… by getting rid of you. I won't allow you to hurt him again."

The necklace remained indifferently cold as she fastened it to the tip of her arrow and aimed it at the sea. She pulled back as hard as she could, and with a release of her hand let the tangle of silver and stones fly out over the waves. The sound it made as it

whipped through the air sounded eerily like singing, and then, with an inconsequential splash, it was gone.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

For the second time in nearly as many days, Garrick woke with the unsettling sensation of knowing he was not where he ought to be. The room he found himself in was dark; thick green draperies covered both the windows and three sides of the massive bed in which he lay. In the firelight, the deep colored velvets and brocades surrounding him shimmered, giving the impression of a light breeze in the verdure of an ancient forest. The effect could not have been accidental: even the four posts of the bed were fashioned to look like the trunks of trees, their branches meeting overhead to support a sumptuous green silk canopy. He noticed that every so often along the knotted columns, a small gilded bird peeped out at him, and at the very highest point in the carved branches sat a tiny golden nest.

In another context he may have found the whole scene quite charming, but on this particular day (or was it night?),

Garrick found the display of golden birds alarming. Something in their stares seemed sinister and he felt his body bracing, as if preparing for an attack. His pulse began to quicken, amplifying the dull pain he was just beginning to notice behind his forehead.

"For goodness sake, get ahold of yourself," he hissed. "They're not even real. And even if they were, what are a few little birds…"

It was at that moment that the scene from the forest came racing back to him.

The last thing he could recall was a shocking burst of feathers, and the beat of tiny wings against his face. After that, the memory dissolved into nothing but pain. There was a fleeting glimpse of Aylan's face, amplified by a white hot light behind her that was about to consume him, and then the darkness, and then nothing.

"And now I'm here."

"Yes, and now you're here."

Garrick sat bolt upright as the unexpected voice answered him from the darkness. "Who's there," he called out.

"No need for alarm," answered the voice at the same time a hand pulled back the curtain from the side of the bed and the elegant face of a gray-haired woman came into view. "It's only me."

"And who are you?"

"I am Henriette. Formerly nursemaid to King Charming, presently so to his children, and now I find you in my care as well."

"Oh." Garrick settled back against the pillows, feeling a sudden wave of vertigo.

"May I suggest that you not make sudden movements? You're still recovering from a rather nasty crack on the head."

"I'll be ok," he said, waving a hand dismissively. "Henriette… wait, do you mean 'Henry?'"

"If you prefer."

Though she couldn't possibly know she'd been his saving grace while he'd been cowering beneath Aylan's bed, Henriette didn't seem the least bit surprised that he should know of her, or call her by her pet name.

"And Henry, how long have I been asleep?" he asked, suddenly hugely aware that he had no idea of the time.

"You've been mostly asleep for nearly two days. There were times when you were conscious but not lucid; you babbled a bit and then slipped under again. I've been with you for all of that time, though I drew the curtains around your bed at night. I assumed you'd want your privacy."

"Oh, umm, right. Thank you. And, uh, what was it that I babbled, exactly? It must have been pretty incoherent? Right?"

"A lot of it was. Some gibberish about birds, and a plan of some sort that went wrong. But mostly you just called her name."

Garrick felt hot blood rushing to his cheeks. "Aylan's name?"

"Yes. Over and over again."

"Was she ever here for that?"

"No. I thought it best to keep her away. She's been so busy trying to rein in her mother's extravagant planning for the party this afternoon, that it wasn't as difficult as it would have been otherwise. She's been frantic to see you though."

Frantic, huh? Garrick liked the sound of that. And then he realized what else Henry had said and sat up once more. "It's Aylan's birthday today!" he gasped… before promptly passing out.

When Garrick recovered a moment later, it was to the strong scent of smelling-salts.

"I told you it was unwise to make sudden movements," said Henriette patiently. "Perhaps you might heed my advice this time?"

"I shall always heed your advice, from now on." Garrick slurred. His head felt as though it were filled with a troupe of drunken ballerinas, spinning madly and knocking each other into various parts of his skull.

"The sensation will pass," said Henriette. "You will certainly make a full recovery, but today it'd be best for you to rest. Shall I have your breakfast sent up?"

"I *can't* rest today, Henry. I'll rest tomorrow when it isn't her birthday. I haven't even had time to get her gift, and, and… Henry, what is that smell? Do you smell that?"

"I do."

"Do you know what it *is*? It smells like something rotting."

"I'm sorry to tell you, but that rather unfortunate scent is coming from the top of your own head."

Garrick blanched. "Has my wound gone septic?"

"No, nothing quite so serious as that," answered Henry, the corner of her lip twitching as if she would laugh. "I didn't think it wise to jostle you too much until we could determine the severity of your injury, so your hair hasn't been washed since you arrived."

"I've gone two days without having my hair washed before. It has *never* smelled like that."

"I'm sure you have," she answered, "but probably never with quite so impressive a crusting of bird droppings in it as you have currently."

"Bird…droppings? Oh my goodness, Henry, am I covered in poop?"

"Just the top of your head is. The rest of you is quite clean." She looked as though it was costing her a serious effort of will to keep from laughing.

"That is *not* funny."

"Of course not," she said soothingly. "It's not funny at all."

"Thank goodness you kept Aylan out of here. I'm forever in your debt."

"Well perhaps you might pay off some of that debt by taking my advice and staying in bed today."

"I can't. I just… can't. It's already been two days as it is, and I — well I miss her. And it's her birthday. I want to be with her to celebrate."

"You shouldn't talk like that young man."

"Henry, let's be frank with each other. You've spent hours listening to me babble her name. You must have already guessed how I feel about her. How much I adore her."

"Adore her?"

"Love her. How much I love her. It just feels like… like…"

"Like she was made to be your perfect match?"

"Yes, like that."

Henriette sighed. "You know, I was told many years ago that I should be expecting you."

"You were? By who?"

"By someone who would know. She said I should help you once you came; although I can't imagine what could possibly be done to help *now*."

"You can help me get out of this bed. Help me get this damned bird crap out of my hair, and help me get to Aylan's party."

"Yes, I suppose. I don't believe I'd be able to stop you anyway."

"That's probably true," answered Garrick with a grateful smile. "Henry, I think there's more. Something more to all of this that I haven't discovered yet. It feels like a piece of the story is missing."

"I *know* there's more. But the part that matters is the ending, and no one can know that until it happens."

"Not even the friend who told you to expect me?"

"No," said Henriette sadly. "Not even my friend."

"But you did promise her you'd help me?"

Henriette's expression suddenly turned quite severe. "No, of course not. I *said* I would help you, but I didn't promise it. I have never made a promise in my life, and I certainly never shall."

"Is that a promise?"

"No. Now get up. Slowly, this time. If we're going to have you ready in time, we've not got a minute to spare."

Chapter Thirty

Aylan did her best to match the smiles and exclamations of her companions, but hidden behind the veneer of girlish excitement at the celebration of her eighteenth birthday, was the constant vision in her mind of Garrick. She was sick with worry over his condition, but also relieved that he'd not be present for the surprise engagement announcement that was going to be made once everyone had gathered.

That is, if Ashton can manage to keep it a secret that long.

He'd been annoyingly, if inconspicuously, attentive to her, making frequent trips to the table laden with refreshments, and passing close enough to skim her with his fingertips nearly every time. The contact made her skin crawl… and made her all the more grateful for the blue silk caressing her in the breeze. Ashton might never know that the gown she wore was a slap to his face, but Aylan knew.

"Aylan, how do you know Ashton Kensington?" whispered Lily, after the third time he'd passed by.

"Oh, uh, my parents and his. They're friends. Why do you ask?"

"Because I think he's in love with you."

Aylan almost choked. "What?"

"Well, it always seems like he means to speak with you, but then just passes by."

"Lily!" exclaimed Marisol, "how do you always manage to make something of nothing? He's been walking the distance between his companions and the punch bowl, and back again. Liam and Gunner and every single one of the rest have been doing the same."

"Yes, but Ashton always walks past *Aylan*. Let's remember that we're standing on a beach. Even given the size of the party — and, let's be honest, the size of Ashton — it's still rather roomy out here. Plenty of space to walk, but he still passes so close to her that you'd think he was making his way through a crowded ballroom."

"You know, that's true," said Rafaela thoughtfully.

"Oh please," answered Aylan. "That's absurd."

"What do you think, Gala?" asked Lily. "You always seem so intuitive. Is Ashton in love?"

"If he were, they'd certainly make a handsome couple," said Gala, avoiding Aylan's gaze."

"I can think of one sure way to settle this," said Lily with a mischievous smirk.

"How's that?" said Marisol.

"Let's ask him of course!"

"Absolutely not," hissed Aylan. "Are you crazy?"

"Oh hush," laughed Lily. "It's all in fun. Hey! Ashton!"

"*Lily!*"

"Ashton!"

He turned toward the group with a rather bemused expression. "Yes?"

"We were just wondering what you think of our birthday girl here?"

Ashton smiled. "She is a vision of feminine beauty," he replied gamely.

"So would you say that you are, or are not, in love with her?"

The group of girls giggled, and Aylan felt herself turning red. Ashton swept into a low bow before looking up and addressing Lily directly. "My mother always taught me that an honest question deserves an honest answer. And so I will tell you honestly that I could not look at Aylan in that dress and still consider myself a man, were I not just a tiny bit in love with her."

"Thank you," said Lily with a laugh. "We were just wondering. Carry on."

Ashton bowed again, and with a chuckle turned back to his group.

"Lily, what is *wrong* with you?" snapped Aylan.

"Oh, come off it," said Rafaela with a grin. "He only meant to compliment you on how pretty you look. He's not *really* in love with you. Lily just likes to cause trouble."

"No, I definitely think he meant it," said Lily.

"Well if he is, what else is new?" laughed Marisol. "They're *all* in love with her. Olivia's brother loves her, Ashton loves her, probably Cole and Gunner love her too. The rest of us are going to have to fight it out for Liam."

"My brother is *not* in love with her," said Olivia defensively.

"Oh no?" asked Lily. "Perhaps we should ask him, too, just to be sure."

"That'd be a great idea — if he were here."

"He is here. Or, he's about to be. Look."

Six sets of eyes turned to where Lily pointed, and there, sure enough, was Garrick making his way slowly toward party. His stature was as upright as ever, though his stride had a very pronounced limp, and his hair was pushed back off of his forehead by a bandage that wound around his head.

"Why do you think he looks so beat up?" asked Rafaela.

"Probably fell of his horse," answered Aylan.

"He's staring at you again, just like last time!"

"I told you he loves her," said Lily.

"He is *not* staring at her," hissed Olivia.

"Perhaps you ought to go help him," murmured Gala under her breath.

"I think that's a wonderful idea," said Olivia, stepping forward to intercept her brother. "Ladies, if you would excuse me for a moment."

"Sheesh, who put a scepter up her backside this morning?" whispered Lily. Marisol and Rafaela giggled, Gala and Aylan did not.

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Ashton Kensington really, really needed to pee.

He'd woken that morning with a strange mix of emotions in his gut: resignation that today would be the day his engagement to Aylan was announced, excitement that the announcement would cement his plan in place, resolve to see it through to the end. And

still, there was something else, something more difficult to define. He'd found that he'd been thinking a lot about Aylan in the time since their encounter in Mylamaire. Not only that, but he was rather curious to see her again.

Now, standing only a few yards from her, he found that he could barely keep his eyes off her. It wasn't just that she looked beautiful, it was that so many others clearly noticed her beauty as well. He'd seen many sets of eyes stop and linger on her longer than they should, and he despised them all. *She belongs to me. She's* my *property.* He'd grown up with a usurper holding claim to half his birthright, and he didn't look kindly on anyone who might covet his things — especially when the thing in question was a princess who was about to give him the military might to take back everything that should have been his in the first place. He wanted to go stand by her side, his hand around her wrist, and stake his claim; but he knew it was still too soon. And so, with no other option to remedy his situation, he was forced to travel back and forth from the punch bowl, making do with the lightest touch as he passed by to remind her, at least, who her master was. That small contact was enough to have induced him to drink six cups of punch already, and he was seriously considering whether he might safely consume a seventh.

It was because of this intense awareness of Aylan, that Ashton was the only one to see her reaction at the unexpected appearance of Garrick. He alone saw the relief and then the horror flash across her eyes, and he alone saw what neither of those emotions could hide: a deep longing at their source. Ashton realized in an instant that Aylan was in love, and it most certainly wasn't with him.

"Oh no you don't, Garrick," Ashton growled under his breath. "You'll not have another thing that belongs to me… and I think it's high time you learned that."

Ashton stepped forward just as Garrick, seemingly against his sister's strong insistence, reached the circle of young ladies. His moment had come.

"Ladies and gentleman," he called out, immediately capturing the attention of everyone gathered. "Now that we're all finally together, I have an announcement to make. I've been trying all morning to hold it in, but I just don't think it can wait any longer."

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Somewhere, buzzing on the edge of his consciousness like a gnat, Garrick was aware of Ashton's voice. He was aware that others were paying rapt attention to that same buzzing, aware that he ought to do the same, but Aylan's hand was in his, and Ashton was nothing but a gnat in his ear.

"Hey, stranger," he whispered into her hand, as he bent to kiss it. "I've missed you." He straightened to meet her eyes, and smiled at the expression of shock he saw there. "I know," he said, "but believe me, it looks worse than it is. And I feel great now that I'm with you."

"Garrick," Aylan murmured. "Didn't you hear?"

"Hear?" He realized that an abrupt applause was tapering off around him, and that Ashton was suddenly at his elbow.

"Well hello there, old neighbor," said the other prince gamely, clapping Garrick on the shoulder. "Glad you could be here for our special day. I'm sure Aylan appreciates your rather warm

greeting, but if you wouldn't mind unhanding her now, I can take it from here."

Garrick broke Aylan's gaze in order to address the confusing interruption, and in doing so found that every set of eyes in the vicinity was focused on him. He tightened his grasp on Aylan's hand. "Why should I?"

"Well my friend, now that I've officially announced our *engagement*, that hand technically belongs to me. And you'll forgive my jealousy, but I don't like to have other people touching my things."

"I don't know what you're playing at, but you're embarrassing yourself. Aylan is not a 'thing,' nor is she yours. Why don't you go get yourself some punch."

"Oh believe me, if you don't let go of my fiancé, there will definitely be some punch coming. And it'll be coming straight from my fist to your face."

"*Ashton,*" Aylan hissed.

"Is that supposed to be a threat? Because it's pathetic."

"You're right. From the look of your face, it seems like someone's already told you what's what. Look at you, with your limp. Hitting you would be well beneath me."

"Ashton, what is *wrong* with you?" snapped Aylan. "Leave him alone."

"See how sweet my future bride is? It's no wonder I love her," said Ashton, grabbing Aylan's wrist.

Aylan gave a startled yelp and then quickly covered her mouth. "Excuse me," she stammered. "Just — just a hiccup."

Garrick's suddenly empty hand dropped to his side. For a moment he stared at it in wonder, and then his gaze turned back to Aylan.

"Aylan, what are you doing?" he asked softly. "I don't understand."

"Don't worry, you'll understand soon," said Ashton. "Imminently, in fact."

Garrick watched as Ashton led Aylan away, toward the center of the assembly. He watched as Aylan followed obediently, never withdrawing her hand from his. The entire exchange between the three had happened at a volume intelligible only to their immediate group, and he could hear Olivia murmuring what was surely damage control into the other princesses' ears. Everyone else was still smiling and calling out congratulations.

Garrick closed his eyes tightly, and felt the earth begin to tip beneath him. He willed the scene on the other side of his eyelids to be nothing more than a manifestation of his concussion, willed it to be gone, willed himself to be anywhere else.

He opened his eyes once more, and immediately sought Aylan. She stood in the very center of her guests, but Ashton was no longer standing beside her. In the time that Garrick had tried to shut out the impossibility of what was happening in front of him, Ashton had dropped to his knee in front of Aylan and produced an enormous yellow diamond ring which he was now slipping onto her finger. The entire assembly burst into applause. The tipping earth swayed precariously as he tried to process what was happening, and then bucked up to meet his face. He vomited just as the two met, and felt the hot stickiness of it coating his cheeks.

"Garrick!" gasped Olivia, rushing to help him off the ground.

"Get away from me," he snapped, his voice forceful enough to cut her off as his arm shoved her away. He stumbled to his feet,

enraged and humiliated. "You were right," he spit at her. "I didn't want to believe you, but you were right about her."

"Garrick, I'm sorry," she whispered.

"You should be. Because if you really intend to marry Liam, you're the next to be humiliated. I hope it's worth it to you, because it isn't to me. I'm done here. I'm going home."

Chapter Thirty-One

October drifted into November. November drifted into December. Gala merely drifted.

Ever since the birthday party that had turned into a surprise engagement party, Gala had done her best to avoid Aylan… which wasn't difficult. Aylan had increasingly taken to her room when she wasn't required to be in lessons, and often even when she was. Gala didn't need to ask what was wrong; Aylan obviously wanted to hide her motive from her friend to spare her feelings, and what Aylan kept hidden, Gala could see. And she'd seen far more than she wanted.

The worst of it had been at the party. When Ashton grabbed Aylan's wrist, he'd squeezed with such crushing force that he'd nearly snapped several of the bones in her hand. Aylan had hidden her pain with a gasp and a flimsy excuse about a hiccup, but Gala had seen it. Not only that, but for the first time, Gala had

felt it too. She now not only suspected she was allowing her best friend to marry a sociopath, she knew it with certainty.

For several weeks, Gala had struggled to release herself from her ill-made promise. She'd tried to approach Aylan to tell her to walk away from the engagement. No, not walk, but *run* away from it. The first time Gala had made up her mind to do so, she'd made it all the way to Aylan's door. She'd raised her hand to knock, but just as she did, her body had inexplicably pivoted and she'd sent her fist plummeting into the bathroom mirror, shattering it. The second time had been worse, the third time nearly fatal.

Resigned that she could do nothing to help Aylan out of her situation, she resolved that she'd at least do nothing to make it worse. That meant steering clear of Aylan completely, so that she might avoid any magical impulse to promote the engagement. The hardest part about keeping the distance was that Aylan, buried in a hopelessness only Gala could see, didn't seem to care about or even notice her friend's absence.

Over the course of those several weeks, Gala was almost constantly aware of another impulse: she still wished to discover the motive behind Olivia's determination to keep her brother away from Aylan. On some days, the pull was nearly as strong as it had been that night in the gallery, when she'd overheard the messenger. On others, it was barely more than a twinge. It had taken Gala some time to wonder at this inconsistency, but when she did, her suspicions made the prospect of learning the secret even more appealing. For if the pull of her magical promise was wavering in this particular impulse, perhaps that meant that the information Olivia possessed could be of help or comfort to Aylan. Gala decided to give in.

After several days of careful observation of Olivia's comings and goings, Gala had her plan in place. Olivia seemed never to leave her room after sunset, nor did she ever invite any of the other girls into her quarters. Gala decided that she'd wait until 10 o'clock — the same time she'd seen the messenger arrive that first night and on one occasion since. If luck was on her side, Olivia would answer without a thought, and Gala had no intention of waiting for an invitation once the door was open.

Gala approached Olivia's door on the chosen night and knocked quietly three times, just as she'd seen the messenger do. The door flew open.

"*I told you, he's gone*! I no longer require your assis — oh. Gala. It's you."

"Yes, it's me. I've come to pay you a visit." Gala glided past the other princess and into the room. "You and I never have much time together, so I thought we could have a little chat. You know, some girl time."

"Right now really isn't good for me. Maybe we can talk tomorrow at breakfast."

"No, I have a feeling this is a conversation you'll want to have in private. So go ahead and close your door, before you let the cat out."

Olivia paled. "What are you talking about?"

"Your cat. Don't you have a cat? I've always sensed that you were hiding… never mind."

"Get out. Now."

"Oh, now that's not very hospitable. What would Lady Dalrymple have to say about such terrible manners?"

Suddenly the dull glow of a secret made itself visible to Gala in the lining of Olivia's drapery. *Jackpot.* She floated further

into the room, and yanked back the curtains, pulling out a sheath of documents.

"What do you think you're doing?" screeched Olivia. "How dare you? Give me those!"

Gala looked up from the papers in her hand, stunned. "Olivia," she whispered. "It was *you* who had all these fake etiquette pamphlets printed!"

"Yes, and it was Lady Dalrymple who distributed them. So you should think very carefully about what might happen if you decide to tell on me."

"But… why?"

"That's none of your business."

"Aylan is my best friend, so it actually is my business."

"What do you want, exactly?" Olivia snapped. "You barged into my room and tried to tear down my curtains. Clearly you've come for more than just a chat."

"I want to know why you want to keep Aylan and Garrick apart so badly."

"How would you even know about that? Actually, you know what? I don't care how you know. That's also none of your business."

"I'm making it my business. And I'm not leaving until I get an answer." Gala noticed a faint glow around the the face of the clock on Olivia's mantle and glanced at it meaningfully. "Tick, tock, Olivia. Tick. Tock."

Olivia's eyes flitted nervously to the clock as well, and back to Gala. "Fine. I can admit that I don't think she's good enough for him. So what? She's happily engaged to someone else. Now please leave."

"If Aylan's not good enough for Garrick, then why is Liam good enough for you?"

"*Excuse* me?"

"I know you want to marry Liam."

"I want you gone," Olivia hissed. "Now."

"Not until I know the whole story. Tell me, and that'll be the end of it. Don't tell me, and I'm going to share the part I *do* know…with everyone."

"You don't know anything."

"That's what you think… kitty cat."

Olivia glared at Gala with pure hatred. "Fine," she whispered. "Sit down, and I'll tell you the story."

Gala sat, not quite believing her 'kitty cat' ploy had worked. The image of a cat sleeping near the clock was by far the most intensely glowing secret in the room, but still… if Lady Dalrymple was already doing Olivia's dirty work, there was no way she'd honestly care that Olivia was hiding a cat somewhere. *She must* really *love that cat. Weird, I'd have never pegged her for an animal person.*

"Wherever I am in this story by a quarter 'til twelve," said Olivia, "I want you out."

"No, I'll leave when I have a satisfactory answer. So talk fast."

"Fine. But when I'm done with the story, you must promise never to tell — "

"I don't make promises anymore. Start."

"A long time ago," began Olivia, "my great-great-grandfather, King Ashton, ruled over a country twice the size of the one my brother will someday inherit. And more than that, he had a beloved wife who gave him not one, but two sons. Twins — "

"Olivia, stop. I've heard this story before."

"That's impossible."

"This is the story of his twin sons, Ashton and Garrick, right? The younger brother, Garrick, proves himself more worthy of the throne, but he's fallen in love with a woman the king finds unacceptable, so he plots to get rid of her. But little does the king know, she's a powerful witch who sets a curse on him and forces him to split his country in two. Am I right? Is this sounding familiar?"

"If you already know the story, then why are you here?" snapped Olivia.

"I told you why I'm here. I want to know why you want to keep Garrick and Aylan apart. Doesn't that story prove they should be together?"

"*Together?* Are you insane? It's bad enough that I have to marry Liam to break the curse. I certainly don't want my brother marrying Aylan and making the whole thing worse."

"To break the curse? But the curse can only be broken if one king gives up his country willingly, right?"

"That's how to break the *first* curse, and it's never going to happen. It's the *second* curse I want to break. I can't stand it anymore."

"Stand what?"

"Turning into a cat every night at midnight! How would you feel if you had to live with something like that?"

Gala's mouth dropped. "Oh, the, uh, second curse. Right. I didn't know the 'cat thing' was because of a *second* curse… I thought it was all just, you know, one big all-encompassing sort of… never mind. But what does turning into a cat have to do with marrying Liam?"

"If I marry him, the curse will be broken… I think."

"Why would you think that?"

"Why wouldn't I? The clues are all right there in the story."

"What story?"

"The story of the second curse!"

"Ok, Olivia, maybe I need my memory refreshed about the second curse after all."

Olivia sighed dramatically. "Fine," she said, "but this time, don't interrupt. The tale of the second curse begins when my great-grandfather, Garrick, was nearly seventeen years old. He was tall and athletic, handsome, clever, well-spoken and well educated… but even so, he knew he could never be king.

Around this time, something new happened: Garrick had grown up knowing that he was engaged to a girl named Aylan — the daughter of that horrid nurse who tricked great-great-grandfather Ashton, and his constant companion since birth. But now that he was nearly a man, he'd grown taller than Aylan, and the difference in their ages seemed remarkably less. The thought that his pretty friend would be his wife in only a few years' time suddenly became a great source of joy for him — even in the midst of his near constant disappointment over his status as second son.

The twins' seventeenth birthday finally arrived, and with all the excitement one might expect of such an important royal celebration. The king declared two weeks' worth of frivolity, with competitions and feasts and balls, and on every day of those two weeks, he presented each of his sons with a lavish gift. On the first day, both boys received a new hunting stallion with a jewel-inlaid saddle. On the second, each was presented with a ship with sails embroidered in gold. I don't recall all the rest, but it was the seventh day's gift that was important. On the seventh day, the twins

were given a menagerie of exotic animals, all of which had been enchanted to speak as humans do.

All the animals were wonderful, but the one that most captivated Prince Garrick was a white tiger with unearthly green eyes. The great cat spent her day pacing and glaring, trying to find a way out of her cage, but whenever Garrick approached she became sweet, licking his hands as if she were nothing more than an overgrown kitten.

"How handsome and clever you are," the tiger would purr. "How superior you are to your brother. Surely it is you who ought to be king!"

Naturally, Garrick, who'd always been intensely jealous of his brother, warmed to her words like a moth to a flame. He returned to the tiger over and over again, never able to get his fill of her praises.

One morning, Garrick and Aylan were out on one of their regular walks through the menagerie, and Aylan was doing her best to keep him away from the tiger. She led him past a group of flamingoes that could sing in five-part harmony, an elephant who told amusing riddles, even a trio of monkeys who could debate philosophy, but again and again, Garrick turned toward the tiger's cage.

"What fascinates you so?" asked Aylan. "You can't be seeking compliments, for you hear those all day long, from everyone you meet. And if its words of love and adoration you wish for," she added shyly, "then perhaps you might lean your ear a little closer and I will whisper them until your heart is full."

"My heart is full already," he answered, "and always will be with you at my side. But I can't help but to be drawn to a being that sees me for what I really am. Or at least, what I should be."

"I see you for who you really are. Leave that cat alone and be happy."

"And what do you think an enchanted tiger might want from me?" he asked, amused by her discomfort. "My love, you cannot possibly be jealous?"

"Of course not. But if you think she wants nothing from you, then her words have had more of an effect than I imagined. Do you not feed her scraps of delicacies from your own table? Have you not ensured her cage is more comfortable than any of the others? Do you not make a pet of her? My darling, it's hard to tell whether she is eating out of your hand, or you are eating out of hers."

By this time the pair had reached the cage of the green-eyed cat, and Garrick called out to her. "Tiger," he said, "a question. Do you praise me only so I will feed you delicacies?"

"No, Your Majesty! I love truth above all else, and wish only to speak the truth of your brilliance to whomever will hear me. Perhaps, though, if you were to bring me some fine wine, I might speak the truth more clearly."

"Exactly as I thought," said Garrick, turning to Aylan just in time to catch her rolling her eyes.

"You're only proving my point," she said.

"Nonsense. Tiger," he called again, "my fiancé believes you speak of my deservedness to rule, only so that I will bring you more cushions to lay on."

"Certainly not!" cried the tiger. "Anyone with eyes can see you are infinitely more worthy than your brother. Just as anyone with eyes can see that I am unhappy in this cage, no matter how many cushions I have."

"And why are you unhappy?"

"I feel so deeply the unfairness of your plight. If I were free, I would walk the earth, telling everyone I could to speak as one and demand that you be made king."

"And that would make you happy?"

"Oh yes!"

"Garrick, *don't,*" whispered Aylan. "She's a wild beast, you can't possibly trust her."

"Relax, darling, can't you see that she means us no harm? 'Wild beast?' — ha! She's as tame as any house cat."

And with that, Garrick unlocked the tiger's cage and declared her free. He lifted his hand to pet her head, but she swatted it away with her paw, nearly snapping his wrist in two. "You are lucky I don't kill you for having kept me in there so long," she growled. "You are cleverer than your brother, but not more clever than me." And then she ran off into the forest without a backward glance, for she'd never cared a bit about the prince, she only cared to be free of him.

Garrick was humiliated of course, but as the audience to his shame was limited only to the woman who truly loved him, he was able to come out of it with most of his pride — and his jealousy — still intact. Not long after, his father concocted the plan to help Garrick take the throne, along with the lie that caused Garrick to deny his love for Aylan. She brought down the curse upon the country that forced the king to choose between breaking up his homeland and saving the lives of his sons. Of course he chose the former, but when Garrick woke from his fevered sleep, it was discovered that the mark of a second curse was still upon him. His eyes had changed from deep brown to a shocking green — the same green hue that the tiger had had — and every night

thereafter, from midnight until dawn, he took the form of a cat. And there you have it."

"But that still doesn't make any sense!" said Gala. "What was the point of it?"

"Well that's the trick isn't it? Garrick only saw Aylan once more in his lifetime — on the same day, here in this very school, that the curse was transferred to my mother — but he never asked what her purpose had been. So we can only guess."

"Does that mean you are only *guessing* at how to break the curse?"

"It's an educated guess!" snapped Olivia defensively.

"So what's your theory?"

"Well, the fact that Prince Garrick's eyes changed color certainly suggests the curse had something to do with the tiger. And what did the tiger do? She was sweet and loving and made Garrick feel appreciated for the man he was. That is, until she was presented with the chance to get the one thing she *really* wanted, and then she betrayed him without a thought. In essence, she showed him her stripes."

"That sounds a lot like what Garrick did to Aylan."

"Exactly. Garrick treated her like a princess; he made her feel greater than what she'd been born to be. But when he was presented with the one thing his heart told him he deserved to have, he betrayed her, seemingly without a thought. Garrick also showed his stripes, and was gifted with a pair of tiger's eyes to match them."

"But he was tricked into the betrayal! He really did love her."

"Obviously not *enough*. And so I believe she set the curse upon him as a reminder of what he'd done."

"So why do you think marrying Liam will break it?"

"Liam is the son of a nobody, just like the witch Aylan. I agree with my great-great-grandfather that a peasant has no right to the throne, but Aylan obviously thought differently. By marrying him, I will have publicly done the opposite of what my grandfather did. He chose the throne; I will choose the nobody."

"Not much of a nobody. He'll still be a king someday, whether you think he deserves to be or not. I just don't see how this could possibly work."

"It doesn't matter. Even if I'm wrong, I'm still right. You see, the curse was handed down to me from my mother — after Garrick and I were born, she never transformed at midnight ever again. So one way or another, marrying Liam will work. If not right away, then when we have children, and it passes to them. Then I'll be free, and Garrick will be free, and I'll have given the curse back to the family that deserves it. Our lineage will no longer be tainted by this wretched magic… theirs will."

"Olivia, that's despicable."

"King Charming nearly destroyed my mother by marrying a peasant. *That* is despicable."

"Have you considered another theory? That maybe the point isn't to choose shame over pride, but rather to choose love over pride? Did you know that our Aylan is the great-granddaughter of that same witch that cast the curse upon your family? They even have the same name."

"Of course I know who she is! My great-grandfather practically filled this wretched country with spies trying to find that witch after he saw her here at the school. Not one was successful until after he died. The spy who finally located Aylan reported back to my mother instead, after she'd woken from her year-long nap. It

nearly broke her again to learn her fiancé had abandoned her not just for a peasant, but for the granddaughter of the woman who'd brought down such chaos upon our family. That Liam is the witch's grandson is the biggest reason it all makes such perfect sense."

"But you're wrong! The witch Aylan perhaps sought to shame the old king when she made him split his country, but she and Garrick still loved each other, even though they'd never be together again. So what would be more fitting than for them to finally get their happy ending? For the great-grandson of Garrick and the great-granddaughter of Aylan to meet and this time to marry? Not out of a desire to break the curse, but simply because they love each other?"

"But they *don't* love each other. Aylan is marrying someone else."

Gala stared intently at Olivia. She'd sensed the lie as soon as the other princess had uttered it. "You say they don't love each other — but Garrick has told you he feels drawn to her, hasn't he? Aylan feels it too, but she tries to hide it. Perhaps you're right, and they don't love each other yet, but I'm almost certain they're meant to be. Everything points to — "

"Gala? Gala are you ok?"

Gala's hands flew to her throat as her promise suddenly gripped her airway and squeezed it tight. She knew she'd landed on the truth. Just as the magical book of stories had hinted, Aylan and Garrick were fated for each other. That was the only ending that would break the curse. And she could never allow it to happen.

"I'm fine," she gasped, struggling for breath. "But you're right. Marrying Liam is the only thing that makes sense. If I were you, I'd keep Garrick as far from Aylan as you can; they'll only

mess up your plan." Satisfied, her promise relaxed its grip, and Gala sucked air desperately into her lungs.

"I'm glad you agree… Uh, is there something wrong with your eyes? You look odd."

"No, no. I think it's just the light. But I'd better get going."

"About time," Olivia grumbled.

"Make sure you keep your brother away from Aylan. Far away."

"Well I'll certainly try, but for goodness sake, Gala, I don't control the man. And for the hundredth time, it's irrelevant. Aylan. Is. Engaged."

"Olivia, if you let him get within twenty feet of her ever again, I will tell everyone your secret," Gala said in a voice as hollow as her eyes were bright.

"Excuse me?"

"Did I stutter?"

"Get out. Now."

"Gladly, kitten," said Gala as she turned and floated gracefully out of the room.

Chapter Thirty-Two

~~*Aylan,*~~

~~*I am writing to let you know how much I don't care. Go ahead and marry Ashton, and think nothing of me – because that's exactly what I think of you. Nothing. You are nothing to me*~~

~~*Aylan,*~~

~~*You almost had me fooled. For a moment I'd forgotten what you really are, and thought myself to be in the presence of a princess. But you're no princess at all. You're cold and unfeeling; no true princess could do what you've done*~~

~~*Aylan,*~~

~~*How could you?*~~

Garrick sat staring at the sheets of paper in front of him. Dozens of them, covered in angry, dashed out words, and none of them close to what he really meant to say.

He'd been home for more than a month, and in that time he'd tried everything. He'd accepted all the invitations that had flooded the palace the moment he arrived — afternoons riding with the local gentry, evenings at the opera with their sisters or daughters. There were balls and concerts, boat racing and banquets. At every step, young ladies were thrust into his path, always un-chaperoned by their normally hawkish parents. No father thought more highly of his daughter's virtue than he did of his daughter's prospects at marrying well, but Garrick wanted none of it.

When the 'gentler' pursuits failed him, Garrick turned to rougher sport. He rampaged through town with his friends, spending huge sums on any frivolous venture that might turn his mind from Aylan. He caused fights in barrooms, danced in bawdy taverns, smashed things for the simple pleasure of knowing that no one could tell him not to. None of it helped; his behavior deteriorated as his desperation increased.

And then, something happened.

The night before, he'd been drinking heavily at a local tavern. The crowd was raucous that night, and barmaids hurried by with tankards of ale, fighting a losing battle to keep the patrons' glasses full. Garrick's companions catcalled and slapped the girls' backsides whenever they passed by, and Garrick, instead of putting a stop to it, stared angrily into his mug. After all, what were these women to him? They were no better than the one who'd almost gotten the best of him.

And then he noticed the girl in the corner.

She was dressed in the same nondescript garb as the others, her hair pulled back off her neck in a hurried chignon. A few dark tendrils had escaped and hung in loose waves against her neck, framing a delicate face. The girl was beautiful, especially against the drab backdrop of her surroundings, but if beauty were all she possessed, Garrick was sure he wouldn't have noticed her. No, there was something else. Something about the upturned tilt of her chin that suggested pride, something about the brightness in her eyes that suggested she knew she was better than the circumstances she'd been given. She was a woman who recognized her own worth. A woman like Aylan.

Garrick exhaled slowly, not wanting the young woman to catch his eye, and force him to turn away from her. He wished to study her, and drink in the spirit he'd been craving for months. It only took a minute or two for his companions to realize his attention had been diverted, and to follow his gaze to where the girl stood.

"'Atta boy, Garrick," slurred Brighton. "You've found yourself the prettiest girl in the room, while we've been ogling over penny-a-piece wenches."

"You better call dibs quick," said Dag with a sneer.

"Dibs," whispered Garrick.

"Too late. Hey, you! Surly girl!"

The girl caught Garrick's eyes for an instant, and then moved on to Dag.

"Yeah, you," he called. "Why don't you put on a smile, sweetheart, and come over here with a few more pints?"

The girl's expression hardened, but she began to arrange mugs on a tray.

"Hey, how about you knock off?" murmured Garrick as she began to weave through the crowd toward their table. "Let's just get out of here."

"Are you kidding?" cried Brighton, with a grin that took the girl in from top to toe. "The night has finally just begun my friend."

Garrick opened his mouth to protest, but by then it was too late. The young woman had arrived at their table.

"Where's that smile I asked for, sweetheart?" said Dag as she placed a mug before each of them. The girl smiled, barring her straight, white teeth, but the smile didn't extend to her dark eyes.

"That's better," purred Dag. "Now why don't you give us a little spin so we can have a look at you?"

"If you're referring to my figure," the girl retorted icily, "I'm sure you'll have a nice view of it as I walk away. Is there anything else I can get you?"

"No, that's all," said Garrick firmly. It didn't stop Dag from stumbling to his feet and lunging at the girl as she turned to leave.

For a brief space of time, everything before Garrick froze. Dag was suspended in the air, reaching for the girl. She stood turned from him, realizing only in that instant what was happening, and just beginning to raise her arms in defense. It was her eyes that caught Garrick. They weren't the caged-bird eyes of the other girls Dag had been handling with so much familiarity all night. Those eyes held resignation, tinted occasionally, but not as often as they should have been, with bitter contempt. This pair held nothing but fire and fight. This pair seemed to be judging whether the punishment that would be doled out for striking an obvious nobleman would be worth the sweetness of it. It was a choice Garrick didn't want her to have to make.

He leapt from his chair, toppling it to the ground, and threw himself on Dag. "Don't touch her!" he snapped.

Dag rolled off the ground clearly ready to throw a punch, but at the last minute restrained himself — even in his drunken state he hadn't forgotten which of the two was a future king. "What's wrong Garrick?" he sneered. "Want her all to yourself?"

Garrick was not held by the same tight restraints of rank as his cohorts; his punch landed firmly on Dag's jaw. As Brighton's mouth hung open uselessly in amazement, Garrick jumped up, and pulled the girl by the wrist through a nearby door. She didn't resist. It was only as the door was slamming shut behind him, that Garrick caught Brighton's shrill laugh. "Well look at that, Dag," he heard his companion call, "he *does* want her all to himself."

Garrick closed his eyes and pressed his fingertips firmly to his temples to keep himself from running back out into the bar, and shutting Brighton up as he had Dag. When he finally felt in control, he opened his eyes, and found himself in a narrow, dusty hall. The girl stood staring up at him, waiting for him to speak.

"I'm sorry about that — them — it was inexcusable."

"I'm pretty sure you just got me fired," she said, a grin threatening the corners of her lips.

"I'm not sorry about *that*," he said severely.

"Why?"

"You're better than this. You're…"

"You don't know me."

"But I do," he said, reaching out to cradle her face in his hands. "I know just who you are."

The girl closed her eyes and tilted her face toward his, and Garrick quickly bent down to close the distance. He wrapped his

arms around her, kissing her hungrily, hoping he'd feel the same glowing warmth he'd felt with Aylan…

He didn't.

Abruptly he broke the embrace and pulled back to look at her face. He found a beautiful girl with bright, knowing eyes, but she would never be Aylan.

"It's already happened for you, hasn't it?" the girl asked him.

"What's already happened for me?"

"That thing… when you kiss someone and it feels like you're melting into them, and you can't tell where you end and the other person begins."

"Yes," he answered softly, after a moment's pause. "Yes, that's happened to me. Has it happened to you?"

"No, never. But it's in all the fairytales, isn't it? True love's kiss? Once you've felt that, how could you ever be happy kissing anyone else?"

"You work *here,* and you still believe in fairytales?"

"And why not? Someday my prince will come. Clearly, it won't be *you*, but someday. Until then, I'm not going to let the present get the best of me."

"You remind me of her. I could tell, even out in the bar. She has that kind of spirit, too."

"Well then, you better go get her. If *I* remind you of her, she must be amazing."

Garrick laughed. "She is amazing. But it's a bit more complicated than that."

"Why?" asked the girl. "Has your lady died?"

"No."

"Taken holy orders?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Is she married?"

"Not yet."

"Then why is it complicated?"

Garrick looked down at his companion's earnest expression and for the first time in weeks felt a sprout of happiness take hold in his chest. "You know what?" he said, "It's not. It's not that complicated."

"So you're going to go get her?"

"Yes. Yes, I think I will."

"Well it looks like I just talked myself out of a pleasant evening, haven't I?" she said with a wink.

Garrick's expression became somber again. "Hold out your hands," he instructed her. Once she'd done so, he pulled a small leather pouch from his pocket and poured a pile of gold coins into them. "I meant it when I said I hoped I'd gotten you fired. If you are unsure, I will happily speak with the proprietor and make certain I've done that job thoroughly. Either way, I don't want you coming back here. You are better than this place, and you know it. Tomorrow morning, present yourself at the palace gates and let the guards know the housekeeper is expecting you. Her name is Charlotte. You'll meet with her and tell her what sort of work you'd most enjoy, and that's the job you shall have. Understand?"

"You know, I was always sure that if I met you, I'd hate you," the girl said quietly. "That you'd be like them," she added, gesturing toward the door.

"You know who I am?"

"Prince Garrick, I'm not an idiot. Everyone in this country knows who you are."

"Well idiot or not, you *would* have hated me. I was never like Dag out there — who, incidentally, will not be allowed back into the palace ever again — but if you'd met me a few months ago, I can almost guarantee you wouldn't have liked me."

"Oh? And what's changed in so short a time?"

Garrick thought about it, and smiled. "It's that girl I've been kissing."

.....

Garrick smiled again as he remembered the conversation. He didn't know the girl's name, but he hoped she'd turned up at the palace that morning as she promised. He'd make inquiries after her later. With a flourish he finally swept all the weeks' worth of angry letters from his desk, and dumped them on the fire in his grate. He was done with them. Instead, he began to write what had really been on his heart all along, and this time the words flowed freely:

Darling Aylan,

I've spent the last several weeks trying desperately not to think of you — trying to convince myself that the pain that seemed ready to tear me in two could be numbed with enough drink or sport. The result of such a foolish mind was very often nothing more than a pounding headache, and an even more clear focus on the one image that I cannot seem to erase from my conscious thoughts, or even my restless dreams. That image is of you, standing in the woods, telling me you love me. I believed it then, and I still believe it now.

Aylan, my heart — my true heart — is the place where my soul finds happiness and wishes to make a home. You, darling, are my heart. If I've been in pain, it is only because I was stupid enough to think I could walk away from my own heart. If I've felt empty, it is only because I had tried to abandon the piece of my soul I left there. I do not wish to look back on my life and see that I was a man who could have been happy. Instead, I want to know that I was the kind of man who fought for happiness, even knowing he might lose — especially knowing he might lose — and so I will fight for you. I will be there soon. I hope you'll wait for me.

I love you.

Garrick read the note over once, and then put it in an envelope and sealed it with his own monogram in wax. He rang for his valet.

"I have decided to honor my sister's request and return for the Winter Ball after all. I shall need you to pack a trunk for me, and arrange transport as quickly as possible. If I can, I'd prefer to leave today."

"Leave it to me, sir."

"Thank you. Before anything else though, I need this letter to be on its way. It should have reached its destination weeks ago, that's how important it is. Do you understand?"

"I believe I do," said the valet, eyeing the address. "If we arrange a series of riders, it should arrive in under a week."

Garrick considered Aylan's engagement standing uncontested for another week. The thought nearly made him ill. "Just get it there, and get my things ready. I'm going to go say goodbye to my parents."

And with that, he set off down the corridor, determined that the life he wanted should begin as quickly as possible.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Olivia glared at her reflection in the mirror. The famous dressmaker who'd been commissioned to create her gown for the Winter Ball was late — again — and Olivia was freezing. She resisted the urge to summon a maid to add more wood to her fire, and instead continued to stand in front of her mirror, trying to decide which poses would best show off her figure in her beautiful gown, and refusing to shiver. "You'll get used to it," she said confidently, eyeing the goosebumps on her naked arms with disdain.

At last she heard the knock at her door, and the seamstress bustled in a moment later, without waiting for an invitation. For what must have been the dozenth time, Olivia resisted the urge to fire her on the spot. "You're late," she said instead.

"As always," answered the seamstress good-naturedly, "but for good reason."

"I should hope you have a good reason. I'm close enough to firing you as it is."

"Now, now, princess, I'm only a few minutes behind. And we both know I'm the only person on earth who could create a gown that comes as close as this one does to matching your own beauty… especially given your rather tight specifications."

Olivia nodded curtly. "That's why I tolerate you. So what's your excuse this time?"

"A surprise for you. I think. One of the stewards stopped me on my way up and asked that I deliver it to you at once. He seemed to think you'd be quite pleased by it."

The seamstress pulled an envelope from her pocket, and Olivia, immediately recognizing the handwriting, snatched it from her hands. The seamstress seemed unfazed. "So perhaps Princess Charming isn't the only one at school with a sweetheart, eh?" she asked with a wink. "I thought you might have one yourself once you began describing the gown you were after. It definitely demands attention."

Olivia bit her tongue, annoyed at how close the seamstress was to the truth. She didn't have a sweetheart yet, but she planned to very soon. After the failures of Plan A and Plan B, Plan C had been to corner Liam at the ball and not let him leave her side until it was over. That is, until she found out that Liam had invited Gala as his date. That left Olivia with Plan D: a strapless gown that was just barely on the right side of propriety, and a love potion for Liam's drink from a soothsayer in the village. "Drugging worked for his mother the peasant, so it can certainly work for me," she thought bitterly. "All's fair in love and war after all."

"So are you going to read your letter?" asked the seamstress. "I promise I won't peek."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "Well if you promise," she said sarcastically.

"Cross my heart. I'll just be busy down here with your hem."

Olivia tugged open the envelope and peered inside. The initials printed on the front were those of the spy she'd hired to keep tabs on Garrick, so she assumed the contents would have something to do with her brother — but she didn't expect to find a second envelope inside the first, this one addressed to Aylan, and sealed with Garrick's monogram in wax. A note scrawled across it read:

> *This arrived this morning via urgent post.*
> *I thought you'd want to know about it.*
> *Your loyal servant,*
> *J*

"What in the world?" Olivia wondered. She opened the second envelope, turning it carefully to hide her brother's seal from prying eyes, and pulled out the letter. Her eyes flew across the words once, then again, then a third time. It was worse than she could have imagined.

> *...That image is of you, telling me you love me. I believed it then, and I still believe it now... You, darling, are my heart... I will fight for you... I will be there soon... I love you.*

Olivia swallowed a gasp. Her brother had been hiding quite a lot from her. Suddenly she cared nothing for her gown; all she wanted was for the seamstress to leave so she could shut her door and scream.

What could he possibly be thinking? To write that he is coming for a woman who is already engaged, and to say that he loves her? Does he intend to marry *her? That cannot possibly be. I will not allow it. Not. Her.*

"Miss DiBourgesse, are you alright?" asked the seamstress. "You're shaking."

"Yes," squeaked Olivia through her teeth. And then more forcefully, "yes, I'm fine. The letter — he just wrote more than I was expecting. I was taken by surprise, that's all. You never expect a man to be so candid with his feelings."

"Ah, so you *do* have a sweetheart! Well you're lucky my dear, believe me. Most of the men I know only have three or four feelings to begin with, and most of those you'd rather they *not* express candidly, if you know what I mean."

"Is that so?" asked Olivia flatly.

"I must say though, it's been many years since I can remember having been so in love that my knees trembled as yours are doing. Care to give a hint who the letter is from?"

Olivia couldn't believe the audacity of the question, but in it she saw an unexpected opportunity. She forced a smile and batted her eyes. "Let's just say, he's someone quite… *charming.*"

"Oh, I was hoping you'd say that!" squealed the seamstress. "How exciting! May I offer my congratulations?"

"Not yet. But I think maybe soon. Listen to this, and tell me what you think." Olivia cleared her throat, and read, "My heart — my *true* heart — is the place where my soul finds happiness and wishes to make a home. You, darling, are my heart."

The seamstress blinked, her mouth agape.

"Well?" demanded Olivia, "what do you think of that?"

"It's beautiful. You seem to have found a man with more than three feelings, that's for certain."

"And his intentions?"

"My dear, any man who would write that can't be far off from a proposal."

Olivia closed her eyes against the pounding in her temples. "Yes," she said, "I think so too."

"Are you sure you're ok, Princess? You look pale."

"I'm fine, just overwhelmed. But happy, of course. I think I'd like some time to myself though."

"Of *course,*" said the seamstress, scurrying eagerly to her feet. "I'll just pop down to the kitchen for tea, and come back in an hour or two. How does that sound?"

"That's fine," said Olivia, trying not to roll her eyes as she watched the seamstress rush toward the door. When it shut behind her, Olivia turned the lock and sank onto her chaise. "Well that's one problem solved," she muttered. "The way that woman gossips, I'm sure half the village will have heard about Liam Charming writing me love letters by supper. No one will be at all surprised when we announce our engagement after the ball."

She smiled at her own cleverness for a moment and then turned her attention to the other problem. "Now what to do with *you*?" she asked, eyeing her brother's note. "I obviously can't give you to Aylan… or anyone else, for that matter. So it's probably better to pretend you never existed."

Olivia stood and walked calmly to her hearth. She tossed the letter on the fire, and watched as it burned down to nothing but ash.

Chapter Thirty-Four

"Gala? Did you hear me?"

"Hmm?"

"I asked if you were excited about the ball tomorrow," repeated Marisol.

"Oh, of course. Isn't everybody?"

"We are," said Lily. "That's why we've just spent our entire breakfast talking about it. But you've barely said a word; what are you staring at over there anyway?"

Gala pulled her eyes away from the far end of the table where Olivia sat chatting with another group of princesses. "Oh, uh, nothing; I wasn't looking at anything. Just daydreaming I guess. Sorry."

"How's Aylan?" asked Rafaela softly. "She almost never comes down to eat with us anymore; is she excited for tomorrow?"

"Definitely," lied Gala. "She can't wait for Ashton to get here. That's probably why she's been skipping so many classes and meals — too busy writing him all those love letters."

"Really?" said Lily skeptically. "I never imagined Aylan as the kind of girl who'd let hearts and flowers go to her head so much."

"Love will do that to you I guess," answered Gala, shrugging her shoulders.

"Well add that to the list of reasons I never want to get married," said Lily, wrinkling her nose.

"Oh, stop that," chided Marisol. "You'll change your mind when the right person comes along."

Gala saw a faint whisper of golden light surround Lily at Marisol's words, but resisted the urge to try to catch the secret before it faded away. Her friend deserved privacy, and besides, Gala had bigger fish to fry. She glanced over at Olivia again. She, too, was bathed in the golden light of a secret, but unlike Lily, the halo around Olivia was so bright it looked like she was being consumed by fire.

"It has to be magically enhanced for me to see it so clearly," reasoned Gala, thinking of her fairy-promise. "Which means Miss Kitty must have learned something new."

Just then, the chiming of bells announced the beginning of the school day, and all the girls got up and began separating into groups to walk to their classes.

"Should we wait for Olivia, or walk down to dance class without her?" asked Marisol.

"Wait," answered Gala. "Let's wait."

.....

"Last dance class before the dance!" giggled Marisol as the trio made their way through the gallery toward their lesson. "Olivia are you excited?"

"I suppose," answered Olivia with a yawn. "But honestly, it's just a ball. I've been to hundreds of them."

Gala rolled her eyes at Olivia's fake nonchalance, but bit her tongue as her companions kept talking. The glow around Olivia had intensified, and it was unsettling to watch Marisol chatting so calmly with a person who looked to Gala as if she were being burned alive. *She might hate Aylan's guts and secretly want to steal my date, but even Olivia doesn't deserve* that *fate. Now Ashton, on the other hand… He could use some fire… with a side of firing squad.*

The blasphemous thought caught the attention of her fairy-promise, which reared up and punished her by slamming her body into the giant pegasus statue at the center of the hall. "Ow!" she whimpered, clutching her shoulder, as she slumped against the bronze flank.

"Gala, are you ok?" cried Marisol. "What happened?"

"I don't know, I must have tripped on something," answered Gala feebly, squeezing her eyes shut against the throbbing pain spreading across her back. *My promise is getting stronger.*

"*You* tripped?" asked Olivia. "Well I guess there really is a first time for everything. Hopefully you won't have a big ugly bruise on that shoulder for tomorrow."

It was the note of smugness in Olivia's voice that forced Gala to stand up straight and open her eyes… and when she did, she froze. The glow around Olivia was gone. It had been extinguished completely.

"What's wrong?" asked Olivia, suddenly looking nervous as Gala studied her.

"Nothing, kitten," whispered Gala. "Come on, let's get to class. We don't want to be late."

Gala smoothed her dress, checking that there were no gaps between her hem and the floor, and then glided forward — but the minute she was clear of the statue, she was blinded by a light so bright she was forced to shield her eyes. "Fire!" she yelled. "There's a fire!"

"Umm, where?" asked Marisol. "I don't see any fire."

Gala peeked between her fingers and found that neither of her companions seemed to be affected by the glare, and both looked utterly confused. She dropped her hands, and tried her best to arrange her features into a bland expression. "Oh… my mistake. Must have been the sun."

"Are you sure you're alright?" asked Marisol, glancing out the window at the low hanging clouds outside. "Because you're making the strangest face. Are you trying to hold in a sneeze or something? I have a handkerchief if you need one."

"No, no handkerchief. But I think I should go get some ice. Olivia's right, I don't want a bruise for tomorrow. You two go ahead, I'll see you later."

Gala turned and headed back the way they'd come, but as soon as her companions disappeared around the corner at the end of the gallery, she reversed course again. The golden halo around Olivia hadn't been extinguished at all, it had simply detached from her and fixed itself upon the door to her suite, which had been blocked from Gala's view by the wings of the pegasus.

Gala stared at the door, which appeared to her eyes as a wall of flame. Clearly there was something on the other side that

her promise badly wanted her to find. She reached out, hoping to find the door locked, but knowing in her heart that it wouldn't be. Just as her fingertips brushed the latch, she heard the distinct click of the lock opening, and a whisper as the door swung free. Gala took one last glance around to ascertain no one was about, and then slipped into Olivia's room, shutting and re-locking the door behind her.

The room looked exactly as it should.

A cheerful fire blazed in the fireplace, bouncing light off Olivia's meticulously arranged bric-a-brac. The bed had already been made, its pile of satin pillows artfully placed in a manner that dared anyone to disturb them. Everything looked as glossy and perfectly refined as the girl who occupied the space; nothing was out of order or out of place… and nothing was glowing. The secret had once again disappeared.

"I don't understand!" cried Gala, wishing very much that she'd been born with the ability to stamp her foot. "What am I supposed to find? Why can't I see it anymore?" She glided around the room, checking every dark corner, every drawer, behind all the drapery. Nothing anywhere had even the faintest shimmer of gold.

"Think!" she commanded herself, settling into a pattern of floating to and fro before the fire. "What is Olivia hiding? My promise wouldn't lead me here for nothing, so what am I missing?"

A draft through the room made her shiver, and suddenly Gala realized what she was missing.

"The heat!" she cried, whirling toward the fireplace. "There's no heat coming off the fire!"

She sank to her knees and hovered just above the hearth, staring with wonder at what she saw there. The flickering that had fooled her eye into perceiving a flame was not a flame at all — it

was a swirl of written words turning in the bright golden glow. Something about the way they were moving seemed oddly familiar to her, as if she'd seen just such a sight before. It struck her then that she had.

"The words are collapsing in on themselves as if they were written on a burning sheet of paper," she murmured. "Burning over and over again."

Tentatively Gala reached out to try to retrieve the letter, and was startled to find that she could. She drew it out until the words were clear, floating and shimmering in the space above the grate…

Darling Aylan,

I've spent the last several weeks trying desperately not to think of you — trying to convince myself that the pain that seemed ready to tear me in two could be stifled with enough drink or sport. The result of such a foolish mind was very often nothing more than a pounding headache, and an even more clear focus on the one image that I cannot seem to erase from my conscious thoughts, or even my restless dreams. That image is of you, standing in the woods, telling me you love me. I believed it then, and I still believe it now.

Aylan, my heart — my true heart — is the place where my soul finds happiness and wishes to make a home. You, darling, are my heart. If I've been in pain, it is only because I was stupid enough to think I could walk away from my own heart. If I've felt empty, it is only because I had tried to abandon the piece of my soul I left there. I do not wish to look back on my life and see that I was a man who could have

been happy. Instead, I want to know that I was the kind of man who fought for happiness, even knowing he might lose — especially knowing he might lose — and so I will fight for you. I will be there soon. I hope you'll wait for me.

I love you.

Gala felt all the blood drain from her face. Though the letter was unsigned, she knew with certainty that it was from Garrick, and not Ashton. There'd be no other reason for Olivia to have burned it.

"So Aylan hasn't seen the letter," Gala murmured. "But they've seen each other. She and Garrick. And it isn't just Aylan in love, he loves her, too. *They love each other.*" Gala felt as if the internal force of her despicable promise would slam her against the wall once more, but this time the violence raged solely on the inside:

I have to tell Aylan that Garrick loves her and that he's coming for her.

I have to tell Ashton that Garrick loves Aylan and that he's coming for her.

I can't tell Ashton… he'd kill Garrick.

I have to tell Ashton… he'll kill Garrick.

Aylan loves Garrick.

Aylan is engaged to Ashton.

Aylan wants to be with Garrick.

Aylan will *marry Ashton.*

I have to tell Aylan.

I have to tell Ashton.

Ashton is a sociopath.

He'll kill Garrick…

He'll kill *Garrick…*

He'll kill Garrick…

He'll kill Garrick…

"He'll kill Garrick," Gala muttered in a hollow voice, her eyes glowing with burnished light. "And when he kills Garrick… problem solved."

Chapter Thirty-Five

Aylan wandered slowly back to her room. She'd ventured out to go to class, but changed her mind and walked the grounds instead. She knew no one would care. Somehow, getting engaged so early had made her both the pride of the school, and an almost non-entity within the school, simultaneously. "Like the portraits hanging in the hall," she thought to herself for the hundredth time. "Here, but with nothing left to do." She couldn't imagine returning to The Royal School for a second year; there was really no point.

She pushed open her door, and pulled the tasseled cord in the corner that would summon Emmie. She'd order a bath and have dinner sent up on a tray.

"Shouldn't you be on your way to embroidery class, poppet?" asked Emmie, when she appeared a moment later.

"Honestly, Emmie, we both know it's been at least a month since I last went to embroidery class."

"And you're not worried your grade will slip?"

Aylan held up her left hand, and flashed the enormous yellow diamond. "Grades are in. I got an A plus."

"Now, don't be like that. That's not the girl I met at the beginning of the year."

"Yes, well. That girl is all grown up now, isn't she? But I don't want to talk about it. I just want a bath, and later some dinner sent up, ok?"

"Ok." Emmie turned to go, but just as she reached the door, she paused. "Can I ask you something? It has nothing to do with… well anything, really."

"Sure," said Aylan.

"Why are you always looking at that blank book of yours?"

Aylan's eyes snapped up. "What do you mean?" she demanded.

"When I come up to make up your bed in the morning, I almost always find it sitting open by your pillow. But the the pages are blank. I just wondered."

"Oh, uh, it's my diary," Aylan stammered. "My godmother gave me a jar of invisible ink to use. It fades when I'm done writing."

"Oh. Well I guess that makes sense for a diary. Shall I keep putting it away in your desk for you, or would you rather I leave it out?"

"If you see it out, just leave it," Aylan whispered. "Thank you."

"Very good," said Emmie.

The moment Emmie left the room, Aylan dove for her desk. She yanked open the drawer, and pulled out her book. For months she thought it had abandoned her. That she'd messed up

her own story so badly, the book had given up. To learn that a new story had been waiting for her all along was the first glimmer of hope she'd felt since returning to school after announcing her engagement.

"Show me," she ordered. The book flew open, and Aylan began to read…

The First Fairy Godmother:
A Tale of the Curiously Long Life of Snow White

Once upon a time, there was a fairy who lived in a deep forest with her two daughters. The girls were uncommonly lovely, each possessing ivory skin, and raven hair, and lips as red as blood. The elder daughter was called Snow White, the younger Rose Red.

One snowy evening, a knock was heard on the cabin door — a knock so great that it shook the icicles from the eaves above the frosted window panes. Snow White, who was the more timid of the two girls, shrank back toward the hearth, but Rose Red jumped up and threw open the door. Outside stood a large brown bear, his fur glittering with ice.

"Oh!" cried Rose Red.

"Forgive me for startling you," said the bear, "but it's very cold, and I wondered if I might warm myself by your fire?"

"But of course you can, bear," called the girls' mother from her seat. "Please come in, and be our guest."

Snow White retreated warily from the lumbering bear, but Rose Red laughed at him gaily. "Bear!" she said.

"Do you propose to turn our floor into one great puddle? You are covered in snow and icicles!"

"That I am," said the bear. "What do you suggest for a remedy?"

"Well I suppose I ought to get the broom, and beat the snow from your fur."

"Oh, no!" cried Snow White, jumping up from her spot at her mother's knees. "No, you mustn't do that! Mother said that he is to be our guest, surely you can't really mean to beat him!"

"Well then what do you suggest?" said Rose Red with a sly wink at the bear.

"We shall brush him gently. Come bear, sit by the fire and make yourself comfortable."

And so the two girls passed the evening brushing their furry guest at the fireside, Snow White carrying on in her sweet, quiet manner, and Rose Red teasing him and pulling his ears. The bear so enjoyed their company that he returned again the next night, and the night after that. In fact, the bear returned every night of that long winter and the girls became so accustomed to his presence, that they never bolted the door until after his arrival.

One evening, the bear came much later than normal, and the girls sat together at the hearth worrying over his whereabouts. When at last they heard the familiar knock at their door, Rose Red ran to open it, and upon seeing the bear threw herself into his arms. The bear nearly lost his balance at the unexpected greeting, and in trying to regain it, he caught a bit of his fur on a nail protruding from the door frame. The girls' fairy mother noticed a sparkle of gold at the spot where

his fur had been yanked out by the nail, but she said nothing; it had been a long time that she'd known the bear was more than he appeared.

"How could you keep us waiting so long?" demanded Rose Red. "Have you no concern at all for our feelings?"

"Dearest Rose Red," answered the bear, "if I hadn't a care for your feelings, I would not be here tonight at all, for I've only come to tell you that I shall not be able to return."

"But why?" gasped Snow White. "Don't you know how I — how we — look forward to seeing you each night?" The poor girl blushed furiously; she was not used to making such declarations.

The bear seemed surprised at her admission, but smiled at her tenderly. "Lovely Snow White, I've enjoyed the nights spent at your family's hearth more than any others I can recall. But you see that the frost has left the ground and the air is warming — so I must now keep to the woods in order to guard the treasures I have hidden there."

"Guard them from whom?" asked Rose Red.

"From those who wish to steal them."

"Can you not just leave your treasures with us? We could surely keep them safe for you."

"Certainly not!" cried the bear. "I could never repay the kindness you've shown me by putting you in such danger."

"It's as bad as all that?" asked Snow White solemnly.

"It's as bad as all that," answered the bear. "And I shall tell you nothing else."

The girls continued to question the bear and pester him, but he refused to say anything more on the subject. The next night they kept their door unlocked as always, but true to his promise, the bear did not return.

Eventually spring came to the forest, and the soggy gray barrenness gave way to a rich tangle of green. Spring was always the happiest time for Snow White and Rose Red, for in the spring they were permitted to spend their days wandering through the forest in search of the plants and herbs their mother would use to make medicines to sell in town. Their excitement this particular spring was enhanced by the girls' mutual wish to find the bear, though neither shared with the other what such an encounter might mean to them.

On the first of their expeditions, the girls decided to hike to a small clearing where they knew a certain type of toadstool grew. They departed eagerly, baskets in hand, but made it only a short way toward their destination before they were halted by a curious sight. At the base of a gnarly old tree, a very small man with a very long beard stood flailing and straining and spewing curses.

"Hello there!" called Rose Red. "Are you in need of assistance?"

"What a stupid girl you are to ask such a stupid question!" cried the stranger. "Isn't it clear that I am in need of assistance? Can't you see that my beard has caught in these roots and that I am quite unable to free myself?"

"And do you not see what a stupid little man you *are, for hurling insults at we who are to be your saviors?"*

"Hush, sister," murmured Snow White. "He's just upset and doesn't know what he's saying. I'm sure he means no harm." She produced a pair of shears from her basket, and gently cut away just enough of the man's beard to free him. "There now, friend, you are free."

"You horrible shrew!" he cried, when he saw that he was trapped no longer. "Just look at what you've done to my beautiful beard! Perhaps you are trying to make me as ugly as yourself, since you are jealous you cannot grow a beard of your own!" And with that he stormed off into the woods, dragging a lumpy burlap sack behind him.

Rose Red burst out laughing. "Darling sister!" she cried, "Please don't think to grow a beard. I assure you, you are quite beautiful enough without one."

"Don't tease," answered Snow White with a smile. "I'm sure that if we ever see him again, he will have gathered his wits and shall thank us."

Several days later, Snow White and Rose Red walked to a lake that was in the center of the forest to collect a special type of cattail. Their baskets were nearly full and they were preparing to return home, when suddenly they heard splashing and a man's voice shouting curses. Both girls ran toward the sound, and when they reached it they found the same tiny man, this time struggling with a fishing line that had caught in his beard. Unfortunately for him, a rather large fish was also caught by the same line, and it looked as if the man would be dragged to his watery death at any moment.

Snow White and Rose Red both dropped their baskets and grabbed the man by his arms, pulling him back

from the water's edge. Snow White again produced her shears, and snipped away the piece of the man's beard that was tangled.

"You evil, evil girls!" he screamed. "Can't you see that you've now cost me my dinner?"

"But saved you your life!" cried Rose Red. "An effort I'm beginning to regret!"

"Oh, he's just startled is all," whispered Snow White. "Don't upset him any further."

The man picked a paper-wrapped package up from the ground, and stormed off with it into the cattails. When he was out of view, they heard his voice call back, "May your ugliness be doubled as my beard has been halved!"

"Still think he's going to thank us?" asked Rose Red.

Snow White turned her palms up helplessly, but did not answer.

A month later, the girls decided to visit a canyon where they knew they could find a rare sort of lichen. They spent the day scraping the chalky gray-green film into their satchels, and had just about gathered enough, when they heard a wretched screeching.

"I'm pretty sure I know what this will be about," said Rose Red wearily, but still she followed her sister toward the sound. When they arrived on a rocky ledge near the top of the canyon, they found the same small man, this time trying to fight off an eagle.

"You know, they generally leave you alone if you don't go digging through their nests like that!" shouted Rose Red.

"Your voice is like the unpleasant cackle of a hyena!" screamed the man.

"Oh Rose! Don't tease him when he's in such trouble," said Snow White. "We must find some way to help him."

"You can't be serious!" cried Rose Red. "What cause have we to risk our lives with that eagle? For him*?"*

"Allow me," said a familiar voice from behind them. The girls turned, and saw their longed-for friend the bear. "I have some business to settle with the dwarf myself," he growled.

The bear climbed to the top of the canyon where the man and the eagle still struggled in the nest, and with one swipe of his paw, the bear cut the dwarf's beard so short he was practically shaven clean.

"Oh, he's going to hate that," said Rose Red with a giggle.

The bear dragged the tiny man down to the rocky ledge where the girls stood watching. The little man screamed and struggled the whole way down, but the bear was as unfazed as if he were carrying a wriggling baby mouse. When he reached the ledge, the bear deposited the dwarf on the ground like a sack of rubbish. The girls expected the usual stream of insults — tenfold now that he was beardless — but it seemed the dwarf was more inclined to offer deference to such a fearful creature as the bear.

"Please, oh please, dear bear! Please don't eat me. You don't want to eat me! I am thin and old, stringy and tough. Spare me and take these two girls instead. They are

young and plump, and I know for certain they are nothing but a nuisance. The forest will be so much better without them!"

"Silence!" cried the bear. "Had I not wished these two to know with what justice I am now acting, you'd already be dead!"

"Spare me!" screamed the dwarf.

"I won't," answered the bear.

The dwarf sprang to his feet and tried to run, but with a great swipe of his paw, the bear sent him flying off the ledge and into the void of the canyon below. For a brief moment there was silence, and then far below came the sound of a muffled thump. Snow White shuddered and Rose Red stood with her mouth agape. The bear stared solemnly at both of them.

And then something very curious happened.

The bear's fur started to loosen and wrinkle, and in a moment it fell away completely. Where once stood a towering bear, there now stood a tall handsome man, dressed in a cape of gold.

Rose Red was the first to speak. "Well I knew I couldn't have truly fallen in love with a bear!"

The young man grinned. "So you love me, too, do you?"

"Right from the start," she answered with a smile. "Imagine my relief that you're human!"

"You just killed that man!" cried Snow White, cutting them off. She wasn't sure if it was an explanation she wanted, or simply to stop the words that she couldn't bear to hear him say to her sister.

"I did," said the young man. "But only because my life was bound to his. You see, I am — or was once — a nobleman in town. Perhaps my home and family are still there, but I've not been able to leave the forest to go and see for myself."

"What happened to you?" asked Rose Red.

"The dwarf was envious of my family's wealth. On the day my father died, and I was to become head of my family estate, the dwarf put the curse on me that turned me into a bear. He stole my fortune and hid it in this forest."

"And you've been searching for it ever since?" asked Snow White.

"No. I've been in the forest ever since because there is no other place for a bear to live. Unfortunately for the dwarf, he didn't realize how well I'd get along here. You see, I made it my business to make friends with the forest and all the creatures who live here. I spread the story of the dwarf's treachery, and gathered allies. That fish you saved him from? The eagle? Even that tree that had him tangled in its roots — all of them knew about the wicked dwarf and were trying to catch him for me."

"Oh no!" moaned Snow White.

"I knew we shouldn't have rescued him!" cried Rose Red.

"Snow White is too sweet, and you, Rose Red, are too brave not to help when help is needed, so of course I'd never blame you. I can see that even now Snow White regrets the dwarf's death — but it was the only way to free me from his curse."

"I don't… regret," mumbled Snow White, blushing furiously.

The young man smiled. "With the aid of my new friends, I soon found my treasures, but I left them where they were hidden. The tree and the fish and the eagle who guarded them all swore to me they'd try to capture the dwarf and deliver him to me when he came to collect his ill-gotten gold. But I knew I'd have to wait many months before the dwarf emerged from his winter den. Until I met the two of you, I had wished that the winter might fly by quickly. After I met you, I found that my wish had been granted, and that I regretted it."

"Tell me your name," demanded Rose Red. I wish to have something to call you other than 'bear.'"

"Well my dearest one, you're to be disappointed — for my name really is Bear. It seems the dwarf was not so creative in his choice of curses."

"Well then I shall call you 'Darling Bear.'"

"And I shall be happy to hear those words each time they cross your pretty lips."

"We should get home to mother," said Snow White abruptly. "We've been gone such a long time, and I don't want her to worry." She couldn't stand to hear another word of adoration between her sister and Bear. It was clear to Snow White that Rose had fallen in love with the young man during those long winter nights — but so had she. Her heart wished to express all the devotion she felt, but her gentle nature would not allow it. She knew that Rose Red would surely marry Bear, and that he'd be lost to her forever. Snow White

turned quickly in the direction of home, so her sister wouldn't catch sight of her tears.

It came to pass that Rose Red did marry Bear, and on the day of the wedding, Snow White stood up as maid-of-honor. The ceremony was simple and traditional, just like any other wedding, but for one respect: the bride and groom did not say "I vow to love and honor you for all my days," or "I promise to love and obey," they simply said "I will *love you…"*

The girls' fairy mother had warned them nearly every day of their lives that they must never promise anything — for as fairy blood coursed through their veins, any promise made would have to be a promise kept. The fear of a binding promise was doubled for the girls, for although Snow White was older, it was only by a few minutes. The girls were twins, identical in every way but disposition, and any promise made by one would apply equally to the other.

"And we don't want poor Snow White bound by a promise to love her sister's husband forever, now do we?" asked their mother cheerfully.

"No we certainly do not!" cried Rose Red with a laugh.

Snow White smiled weakly. She knew the promise would make no difference; she already planned on loving him until the end of her days, with or without magical intervention.

It took only a season after her sister's marriage for Snow White to tire of the forest. It no longer held the charm

for her it once had; in fact, with the newly-weds living only a short walk from her mother's small cabin, Snow White suddenly found the forest to be quite crowded and overbearing. She knew she needed to escape her home before she could ever escape her heart break.

Early one chilly morning, Snow White packed her few belongings, kissed her still-sleeping mother, and left the forest behind. She walked for several days, until she came to the edge of an impressively large and bustling city.

"How sheltered I've been," she exclaimed in surprise. "I had no idea we were so near a city."

And indeed, it was not just any city, but the capital city; the whole sprawling expanse surrounded the glistening palace of the country's king and queen. Snow White walked down into the city to see what fortune might be in store for her there. She had nothing but her few dresses and her vast store of knowledge of healing plants and potions. It was more than enough.

She set up shop as a healer, and soon became renowned for her skill. So famous did she become, that word of her talent eventually made it all the way to the king's ear. He ordered her to the palace at once, for the queen was very soon to give birth, and the king was determined that she should have only the very best care.

Away Snow White went to tend to the royal family, and there she stayed. Her gentle manner and knack for easing pain endeared her immediately to the queen, who insisted on never being without her services. Snow White accepted a position as personal healer to Her Majesty, and settled gladly into her new home within the beautiful palace walls. Though

she couldn't stop herself completely from dreaming of Bear, the glittering fantasy she'd stepped into at least ensured that she thought of him less.

When the time came, the queen did give birth, not to one son, but two. Snow White had the honor of delivering the heir to the throne of her homeland, whom she had immediately to hand off to a nurse so that she might also deliver the heir's little brother. If her fairy blood had gifted her with a talent for seeing into the future, Snow White might have held on to that baby — but since it did not, she was unaware of the far-reaching consequences she'd set in motion by simply handing the squirming infant off to the first set of available hands.

The nurse who received the infant had only to see the face of the second baby to realize the two were identical, and from there she thought up a dastardly plot. The nurse bid her young daughter take the second baby while Snow White attended to the queen, and together the pair went to present the babies to their father, the king.

"Congratulations, Your Majesty, you are a father!" cried the nurse. "Please allow me to introduce you to your son… and my daughter shall introduce you to your other son!"

The king roared with laughter. "Twins!" cried he, "how marvelous! Let me see my sons!"

The nurse turned back the swaddling to let the king see his children, and upon looking at their tiny faces, he exclaimed how absolutely identical they were. "I'd even wager they each have the same number of eyelashes!"

At this the nurse grinned even wider. She knew only one of the sons could inherit the throne — the eldest — and that there was no one else on earth but she and her daughter

who could absolutely identify which of the two boys was the rightful heir…

"Wait, wait, wait," exclaimed Aylan. "I already know *this* story! It's the same one Ashton told me the day he kidnapped me. I have no need to hear this tale again. Especially not tonight."

She stared down at the book in her lap expectantly, but nothing happened.

"Seriously, book, I know what happens. The nurse bribes the king and secures a place for her daughter at court. The little girl and the younger son grow up together and eventually fall in love. The king decides the younger son is more worthy of the crown, but refuses to allow the nurse's daughter to become queen. He plots against them, and tricks his son into denying her. She leaves — but wait! — Snow White taught her some magic, so now she's a witch and knows lots of fancy spells. She forces the king to tear his country in half as penance, and sets terms that ensure it shall never be made whole again. Is this sounding familiar? Do I have it right?"

Not a moment after her speech, several pages turned, seemingly of their own volition. Aylan rolled her eyes, and began reading once more.

The King was heartbroken and humiliated at the prospect of tearing apart his country, yet he could not allow his sons to perish. He called for a map of his lands and carefully drew a new border, which exactly divided the country into two equal parts. Over the northern part, where great forests of fine timber and game surrounded dozens of small villages, he set his older son as king, and over the southern

portion, which hugged the coastline and held many bustling port cities and centers for trade, he set his younger son. Instantly the two young men's health began to recover, though, curiously, when the younger son awoke, his deep brown eyes had been transformed into a shocking emerald green. Never again could one son be mistaken for the other, and for the rest of his life, the younger boy would see a reminder of the jealousy that was his downfall every time he looked in his mirror.

When it became clear that the princes' lives were no longer in peril, Snow White excused herself and walked wearily to her room. She knew that she'd stay on at the palace, but with Aylan gone, her heart would no longer be truly there. Over twenty years, the young girl who'd been abandoned at the castle to marry a prince had become like a daughter, filling the hole that had been left when she'd walked away from her own family. Briefly Snow White considered returning to the forest, but she put the thought aside; though the pain of losing Bear had softened considerably over the years, the thought of facing him again caused an ache that suggested the wound was not healed enough not to rip open once more.

It was in the midst of this particular contemplation that Snow White heard a soft knock upon her door. When she answered, she found the very last person she expected to see.

"Aylan! What are you doing here? Come inside quickly, do you know what they might do to you if they find you?"

"I don't think they'd do a thing," answered Aylan grimly. "I believe the king has learned that lesson."

Nevertheless, she stepped into the room and shut the door, and once that was done she burst into tears.

"Oh Snow, Snow! What have I done? I shall never see him again; how shall I survive?"

"You'll survive it, my dear, I know you shall. And perhaps the story of Aylan and Garrick hasn't truly ended yet."

"It hasn't. The story is so far from done," whispered Aylan, in a voice that sounded much older than her twenty-three years.

"Then there is hope for a reunion?"

"No. I came to say goodbye to you, and then I plan to travel as far away as I can. Maybe he'll follow me, but I don't think he will. So I shall just have to find new happiness. But Snow? I — I had a vision."

"A vision?"

"Yes. Perhaps I've gone mad. But when I cast that spell, I saw them. His great-grandson and my…"

"Your what?"

"Oh Snow, I don't know. Maybe I didn't see anything at all. Maybe I'm crazy. But for a moment it looked so real. As if the two of them were right in front of me. And they were so happy, so in love…"

"Aylan, you're speaking of two people who don't even exist. Whose grandparents *don't even exist."*

Aylan cried harder, her eyes wild with grief and desperation. "Promise me, Snow. Promise me that if they are real, that if they ever were — that you'd help them."

Snow White cringed. She'd never told Aylan about the danger of a promise… but what harm could this promise

do? If the great-grandchildren of Aylan and Garrick were ever real, surely she wouldn't be alive to see them. Perhaps at their birth — though even that was unlikely — but by the time they were old enough to find each other? To love each other? By then, she'd be long dead in her grave. No, there could be no harm in it.

"Of course, my love. Of course I promise."

Aylan buried her head against Snow White's shoulder and cried her eyes dry. She never saw the flash of gold in Snow White's eyes — the flash that sealed the fate not of two people who were not yet born, but of two who were already very much alive.

It took several months for Snow White to decide that she must return to the forest. Although she still believed the promise she'd made had been harmless, it didn't seem right that her sister should be unaware of it. So one day she gathered her things, and reversed the journey she'd taken so many years ago.

It took the better part of a week, but eventually Snow White found herself standing on a small hill, with the cabins of her mother and sister on the flat ground below. The house she'd grown up in had altered very little, but in the yard of her sister's home she saw a cheerful flower garden and little girl playing with a shaggy dog. Snow White called greetings as she made her way down the hill, and soon the door of the cabin opened and two more figures appeared.

"Snow!" called Rose Red upon spying her sister. "Oh Snow White, is it really you?" She began running up the hill just as Snow White began to run down it. The two leapt

into each other's arms, spinning and laughing, until eventually they collapsed into a tangled heap on the ground. "How could you leave us like that? Why did you go? We looked and looked, but we had no idea even in which direction you had gone!"

"Oh Rose! Rose I've missed you so, so much. And I — do you mind if we talk later about that? The leaving?"

"Oh darling, of course! You're home; that's all I really care about."

'Home,' thought Snow White, turning her sister's word over in her mind. Was this her home? Or was the palace her home? Or had she no home at all? Carefully Snow White looked up, not at her sister, but at Bear.

He'd changed so little in all that time.

Streaks of gray at his temple hinted at the years that had passed, and lines at the corners of his eyes spoke to the joy that filled those years. He smiled, and suddenly it hit her: the gaping wound that had pulsed with every step she'd taken toward the forest, and the pain that had always threatened at the edges of her consciousness — they were gone. When she looked at Bear, she didn't see the man who'd broken her heart, she saw the man who loved her beloved sister. A brother, and hopefully also a friend.

Snow White turned back to Rose Red with a wide grin. "Yes," she answered. "I'm home."

That night, Snow White found herself curled up in a bed in the guest room of her sister's cottage. Her belly and her heart were both unbearably full from the celebration of her homecoming. She smiled against her pillow as she made plans

to build her own home in the forest — not a place to always stay, for she still loved her life in the city, but a place to return and share the happy moments of her life with those she loved best. A fortnight later, when the time came for her to return to the palace, her family waved her off and bid her come home again soon.

For several years, Snow White continued on in blissful happiness. She worked for the Queen, who she admired and esteemed, she kept correspondence with Aylan, who was the daughter of her heart, and every few months she returned to her home in the forest and basked in the warmth of her family. Had she not been so fully at peace, she might have noticed the changes sooner. As it was, it took a full seven years before she began to suspect that the promise she'd made to Aylan — and forgotten to tell her sister about — was affecting her in ways she'd never expected.

It began with a conversation. The queen had summoned Snow White to discuss remedies for an outbreak of chickenpox in the village. The two sat together on a small bench in the sun, first discussing the matter at hand, and then gossiping away another whole hour like the old friends they were. When Snow White finally stood to leave, the queen grabbed her wrist and looked at her appraisingly. "Turn your head that way," she ordered. Snow White did as she was bid, turning her face toward the sunlight. "I believe you are holding out on me," the queen admonished softly.

"Your Majesty?" asked Snow White, confused.

"I've spent years keeping your counsel on remedies for pain and illness — I should have known to ask you the cure

for aging as well. Tell me, what do you put on your skin? We are near the same age, you and I, but you have none of the lines that are starting to appear on my own cheeks."

Snow White blushed at the queen's kind words. "You flatter me, Your Majesty. I wish I could tell you some great secret, but I have none. I use the same soapbark and chamomile that you use yourself."

"Hmm," said the queen thoughtfully. "Well perhaps if you don't start catching up to me soon, I shall set you in the sun for a summer. That ought to do the trick."

Snow White grinned. "I am yours to command," she answered.

The incident left Snow White with a vague sense of unease, but she soon put it away. However, when it returned again several years later, she found the discomfort much more difficult to suppress. On that particular day, Snow White had gone into an unfamiliar part of city to purchase a few herbs that could only be obtained by trade. She'd rarely had need of such things, so when she entered the merchant's shop she found that, despite her fame, she was wholly unknown to the proprietor.

He was a young man, no more than thirty, and in the course of their conversation, Snow White discovered that he was also a widower of many years. She would have pitied him — if *he hadn't made his interest in her quite apparent within minutes of their introduction. Still, Snow White tried to get on with her business as quickly as she could, despite his unwelcome attentions. It was not until he made a suggestive reference to the aphrodisiacal qualities of a particular flower, that Snow White finally had had enough.*

"Sir," she cried, "while it is endearing to have caught the fancy of such a handsome young man, I might point out that your efforts would be better spent on someone more your own age. Do you not agree?"

"My own age?" asked the young man, befuddled. "Madam, I am only twenty-nine!"

"And I am nearly fifty!" Snow White snapped.

The man's mouth gaped, and then his expression turned stormy. "If you weren't interested, you could have just said so," he said in a wounded tone. "No need to make up such ridiculous excuses."

"Excuses? But I am —

"It's fine," interrupted the man. "No explanation will be necessary. Let me wrap up your things."

When he had done so, Snow White gathered her purchases and hurried from the store. She kept her head bent as she made her way back to the palace, suddenly wary of any passerby looking too closely at her face. Upon reaching the palace, she entered through a back passageway, and went directly to her room. It was only there, safely locked behind a heavy wooden door, that Snow White sought her reflection in the mirror. She gasped at what she saw.

It was true that she was nearly fifty. She'd been a girl of twenty when she'd been brought into the service of the royal family, and at thirty-eight she'd made her promise to Aylan. That had been more than eleven years ago — and yet Snow White hadn't seemed to have aged beyond that day.

"Oh no," she whispered.

Suddenly the enormity of what she'd done settled upon her. She'd made her promise loosely, convinced that she

wouldn't be alive to have to fulfill it. And given the course of a normal human life, her assumption would have been correct. But Snow White was a fairy, and fairy promises were absolutely binding. Could it be that she had stopped the progression of her own life in order to live for someone else? Someone she'd never met? Someone who might never even exist?

"Oh no," she whispered again. "What have I done?"

Immediately her thoughts jumped to her sister, and in the next moment she was frantically packing her things. In less than half an hour she passed through the palace gates again, this time aiming her steps toward her beloved forest. She knew she'd never return.

The trip home was longer than normal, for the closer she got, the slower Snow White dragged her feet, but even so, the many days seemed to fly by. In what felt like a blink Snow White found herself standing once more atop the little hill looking down into the garden of her sister's cottage. In two blinks she was sitting with her family around the dinner table, and in three she discovered she'd run out of excuses for delaying her confession any longer. She took one deep breath and then told her tale.

The family sat in stunned silence, each processing the story in turn. It was Snow White's mother who arrived at the ending first, and it took her only a moment. She looked from the unnaturally youthful countenance of first one daughter, and then the other, and whispered, "What have you done?"

In that instant, Rose Red and Bear understood too, and they reached for each other in unison. Snow White burst into tears but had no one to hold.

Years passed. Eventually the girls' mother passed away, and Bear, too, became old. A day came when Rose Red's daughter began to look less like a daughter than a sister. An older sister. No one commented on it.

For twenty-five years Snow White and Rose Red waited… Waited to discover what they were living for, while those around them continued a steady march toward dying. At the end of those twenty-five years a messenger arrived, and both knew the wait was over. He came bearing a letter, and along with it a tale of many months of searching for the person to whom he was to deliver it.

"She told me that I had to find you, and deliver it directly to your hand," the messenger said as he turned his letter over to Snow White.

Snow White recognized the hand of her beloved Aylan, and tore the letter open at once. It said:

Dearest Snow White,

I've written you these many years, only now to learn that you left the palace long ago. I have news that I am determined to share with you, and have hired a man who says he can do the job. If you are reading these words, he has.

It's been thirty-six years since I last saw your dear face, and it tugs my heart to imagine the changes I'd see in it were I ever to behold it again. I admit that my own reflection

in the glass is decidedly altered in that time as well. When last we saw each other, I told you I was going out into the world to find myself a new happiness, and so I have. I was married long ago, and have a son. He was a joyful boy who became a wonderful man, and is now a father himself. Can you believe that I am a grandmother?

The little girl, my granddaughter, is named Elle, and she is the absolute peak of my life. I've told you as much in the many letters I've sent over the years, but this is the first time I shall write of what I am now to communicate…

Do you remember when I told you I'd had a vision? It was so brief, so fleeting, that I told myself it was merely a response to the grief that nearly overcame me that day. But my dearest Snow White, when I look at Elle's sweet face, I am not so sure. I look at her, and I feel *that the story is being told once more, and that she is at the start of it. Do you think me mad for hoping it's the truth? You've always been the mother of my heart — and it's a mother's love and counsel I find myself craving. Write to me, if you can. Send me some comfort. I miss you terribly.*

All my love, for always,
Aylan

Immediately Snow White felt the pull of her long-dormant promise. She knew it wouldn't be long before the strength of the pull had her leaving the woods, most probably forever, to travel to a far-away land and a little girl named Elle. Rose Red felt the same, but she had an anchor against that wayward wind — a beloved husband who'd long since

surrendered his youth, and could no longer leave his home. Rose read the letter once, and then turned and walked into her bedroom, and shut the door.

For three days Snow White neither saw nor heard from her sister or Bear. She was nearly prepared to break down their door, when at last her sister reappeared. Rose Red looked worn down and tired, as if she hadn't slept in all that time, but more than that, she looked — older.

"Rose, what have you done?" asked Snow White with a gasp.

Rose Red did not answer, but held out her hand. In it was a stunning sapphire necklace, the stones artfully tangled to look like a rolling sea.

"What is it?" asked Snow White.

"It's a replica of another necklace," answered Rose Red, "and it is also the fulfillment of a promise that I did not make."

"I don't understand you."

"As the daughter of a fairy, I've never uttered a promise in all my life. But as a woman, in my heart, I did make one… on my wedding day. I promised to spend the rest of my life at the side of the man I love, and I've earned the right to follow that man into whatever light or darkness awaits us at the end of it. My life is my own. *I shall not live it for anyone else's happiness. I shall not exist on anyone else's terms."*

In the time it took her to utter the words, Rose Red seemed to age another ten years. Snow White stared at her in horror.

"In the time when you were gone," Rose Red continued, "our mother taught me as much about fairy magic as she had knowledge of. Aside from many other things, it seems we're each gifted with a particular talent. Yours is a knack for healing, hers was the ability to see that which is hidden, and mine — mine is a talent for charms."

"Charms?"

"Passing some of my magic to objects."

"And you've charmed that necklace?"

"I've transferred the binding magic of the promise you made into it. At least, my *portion of that promise. It no longer has a hold on me." Rose Red sank into a chair. She was too old now to stand without tiring. "I've read the tea leaves and consulted mother's charts of the stars, and I believe that Aylan was right that her granddaughter, Elle, shall be part of this tale. But it shall be* her *daughter that will be its principle — the daughter of both a commoner and a king. She, too, will be called Aylan, after Elle's beloved grandmother."*

"Rose, let me help you to bed," said Snow White in anguish.

"Not until I've finished. The queen in the country where you are going has a necklace just like this one. It's an heirloom that will continue to be passed down. You must find a way to switch the two. If you do, the necklace will find its own way into the right hands at the proper time."

"And it will help them, just as I've sworn to do?"

Rose Red smiled weakly. "It will help them, but only if they've already chosen each other. Otherwise, it'll just be a pretty necklace."

"Ok," whispered Snow White. "I'll find a way to deliver the necklace."

"Thank you," said Rose Red. "Now if you would help me to my bed, dearest sister. And send my daughter in to me."

Snow White did as she was bid, and for several hours sat vigil at her sister's door. Just before midnight, her niece stepped out into the hall. "They are gone," she said simply. "Both of them."

"Oh my dear, I am so sorry," answered Snow White.

"I am not. They are together, just as they had always wished to be. They were smiling."

Snow White stood and embraced her niece, but neither had the strength for tears. After a while they parted, and her niece said, "I heard you and my mother talking, aunt. I'd like to go with you, and help you with whatever it is you have to do.

"Thank you," answered Snow White. "I'd like that."

They next day, the pair walked out of the forest for the last time, and began their journey to an unknown land…

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Snow White and her niece did eventually make it to that far away land. The niece secured a position in the palace as a nursemaid to young Prince Charming, the son of that country's king and the queen, and it was not long before she was able to switch the necklaces. Even having accomplished

that, she stayed on, and was the beloved companion of not only the prince, but eventually also of his children.

Snow White spent her days with Aylan, in a house surrounded by a beautiful garden of flowers. It was a place where there were no secrets. She met Aylan's son, and the sweet child named Elle. So well did she and the young girl take to each other, that Snow White was asked to become Elle's godmother. Her fairy godmother. It was a role Snow White accepted gladly, and would have even without the silent goading of a magical promise.

The End.

Aylan sank back against her pillows, exhausted. She felt overwhelmed by the weight of everything she had learned: That her godmother had known the first Aylan and Garrick. That her beloved Henriette was almost certainly the unnamed niece. That the necklace, which she'd so unceremoniously cast into the sea, really had been trying to help her. All of it was incredible. And yet, beyond all those mysteries now solved, the one thing that stood out most in her mind was the utterance of Rose Red, her godmother's long-dead twin sister: *My life is* my own. *I shall not live it for anyone else's happiness. I shall not exist on anyone else's terms.*

Aylan thought of how she'd been living for the past several months. It had been on Ashton's terms and for Gala's sake, and she, Aylan, had been existing in darkness.

My life is my own. *I shall not live it for anyone else's happiness. I shall not exist on anyone else's terms.*

She thought of those precious moments of light with Garrick.

My life is my own.

She thought of her engagement, at the point of a knife.

I shall not exist on anyone else's terms.

She thought of Gala, whose protection had been purchased at the expense of her free will.

I shall not live for anyone else's happiness.

Suddenly Aylan stood up, a rush of clarity washing over her and carrying away the despair of all the weeks she'd lived through since Garrick had left. She'd fallen in love with him, and he, she was certain, had fallen in love with her. Not the version of her that had accepted a life that felt unworthy, and certainly not the resigned and depressingly listless shadow she'd become since accepting it, but the strong, confident girl he'd found on the beach. The girl who could sail a ship. The girl who'd wagered a kiss on a horserace. The girl who would choose her own happiness, on her own terms, and ancestors and fairy-promises and psychotic fiancés be *damned*.

"I *am* a fairytale's daughter," she said proudly, her words filling the empty room, "and it's about time I took back my story."

Chapter Thirty-Six

On the morning of the Winter Ball, Emmie woke up, just as she always did, at precisely a quarter till seven. She washed her face in cold water and tied her hair back in the same loose chignon she always wore. By seven-fifteen she'd dressed in the same crisp cotton gown she wore every day, and tied a starched white apron around her waist, cinching it tightly. And at exactly seven-thirty, Emmie arrived at Aylan's door, the same time she arrived every morning. She didn't bother checking Gala's door, for she knew that one was always locked, nor did she bother knocking at Aylan's. Emmie pushed the door open, prepared to deliver the same line she always did to rouse the girl from bed. She inhaled, the words already waiting at the tip of her tongue — and then choked.

"You're awake!" she spluttered.

"That I am," said Aylan cheerfully.

Emmie looked wildly around the room for a clock. "But — but it's only seven-thirty! You are never awake at seven-thirty!"

"Well I am today," Aylan answered, appearing rather amused by Emmie's confusion. "Perhaps I was just eager for this day to begin. It's going to be a very important day for me."

"That it is," said Emmie, narrowing her eyes. "I'm pleased you finally seem to be feeling the appropriate amount of excitement."

"What do you mean?"

"Well these past few weeks you've seemed so — I don't know — you just seemed not to care anymore. Not a single fight over your hair, even. You'd just sit there quietly and let me pin away..." Emmie shuddered, not wanting to admit how much it had bothered her when Aylan had allowed her to start piling her hair into elaborate up-dos again.

Aylan smiled. "Well today I shall fight you over my hair. And I will win. *Today,* Emmie, I care a great deal. So I won't have any of your ridiculous princess-hair nonsense. We're done with that. Permanently."

"Well look at that," said Emmie, "Little Miss has got her spunk back. About time, too; was beginning to miss you."

"I wish I'd found it sooner. I was beginning to miss me too."

Emmie smiled. Clearly today *wasn't* going to be a day like all the others after all.

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Aylan stared at the mirror in front of her as Emmie combed scented oil through her freshly washed hair. She was concentrating intensely on a single phrase, which she repeated

again and again in her mind. It was: "I will tell you anything want to know. I will tell you anything you want to know." The phrase was for Gala's benefit. Her friend would see the change in her immediately, and wonder at it. But would she ask? Aylan was gambling on the fact that she wouldn't. And if Gala didn't ask, Aylan had a shot at keeping her plans a secret — but only if she could make herself believe, *really believe*, that if Gala did ask, she'd answer honestly. Her friend could only see what was being deliberately hidden; it was a fine line to tread.

I will tell you anything you want to know. I will tell you anything you want to know.

As if on cue, Gala tugged her door open and drifted quietly into the bathroom. There was a vaguely haunted look about her eyes that Aylan had never seen there before.

"Er, good morning," said Aylan.

"Good morning," answered Gala, confusion momentarily erasing the flat blankness of her stare. "You're talking again."

"Yes, I guess I am." *I will tell you anything you want to know.*

"Are you, umm, excited for tonight?"

"Yes, very." It was the truth. *I will tell you anything you want to know.*

Gala looked at Aylan queerly, but sat down on her own bench in front of the mirror without comment. Aylan exhaled. Her plan seemed to be working.

"I can't wait to see Liam tonight. Weird, I never thought I'd actually miss my brother."

Gala ducked her head and Aylan watched the dullness fade further from her eyes. "I can't wait to see him too."

Aylan smiled. This was a conversational path she was happy to go down. "Well I know he's looking forward to seeing you."

"Really? Did he say something?"

"No, but he didn't have to. Every time anyone mentions you he gets all flustered. And since I'm not around to tease, my parents mention you *a lot.* Dad wrote to me and said it's hilarious."

"Really?"

"Yeah, they tend to take things a bit far. My mom said you and Liam have been writing each other. I hope you don't mind that she told me. I wish you would have."

"He has. Ever since… that day. He asked on the sail home if he could write me. I felt guilty feeling so happy about anything after what had just happened."

"But you were happy?"

"In that moment I was. I said yes. And when his letters arrive, those are generally the happiest moments I've had since that day."

"Gala," said Aylan, suddenly feeling a wave of guilt. "I'm sorry. I know I've been a bad friend lately, but I'd never not want you to be happy. I love that you and Liam have been writing. I mean, you could probably do *way* better… but he couldn't. You're the best of the best."

"How can you possibly say that?"

"Because its true, half-breed."

"Aylan, what's different? Something is different."

I'll tell you anything you want to know. I'll tell you anything you want to know. "Its not what's different, its what's the same. I haven't been myself, and I realized how crazy that was. I can't always control the things that happen to me — and neither can you — but that doesn't mean I should change who I am. I just decided it was time to be Aylan again." *I'll tell you anything you want to know. I'll tell you anything you want to know.*

Gala blinked rapidly, and shook her head as if trying to clear it. Aylan held her breath. For a moment she could see a flash of struggle in Gala's eyes, but in the next moment, it was gone. "I'm happy you're back," Gala said. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too. Now tell me what my idiot brother has been writing about. The fact that you're even able to read his chicken scratch tells me you two might just be perfect for each other."

Gala giggled and their cheerful conversation continued. Aylan carefully avoided any mention of Ashton in their chatter about the night to come, and so did Gala — the former so as not to accidentally reveal her intention to leave him, and the later so as not to accidentally reveal her intention to provoke his homicidal urges. For the space of an hour, things between the two friends resumed some semblance of normalcy.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Aylan stood near her bedroom door, waiting for the knock she knew she'd hear at any moment. Gala was still fluttering around the bathroom making last minute changes to her hair and makeup, but Aylan had no need to participate in that ritual. She looked stunningly beautiful, and the way she carried herself made it clear that she was well aware of that fact. Her dress swept around her body, enhancing the length of her figure. She wore her hair down in her signature style, but had allowed Emmie to smooth it into a glossy sheet of gold that flooded over her shoulders. Her eyes were rimmed in kohl, and a light dusting of rosy blush on her cheeks made her look as if she'd just stepped in after a sunny day. The only piece of her ensemble that dissatisfied her was the heavy yellow diamond on her ring finger, but if all went to plan, she'd be rid of it shortly. That thought brought a smile to her lips — exactly the thing she needed to look absolutely perfect.

Just then, Aylan heard the anticipated knocking. "Show time," she murmured.

"Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, they're *here*," squealed Gala, flying in from the bathroom. "How do I look?"

"You look gorgeous," said Aylan.

"Look who's talking," answered Gala with a nervous giggle.

"Ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

Aylan pulled open the door. Behind it stood Ashton and Liam, both in full dress regalia. Liam was clutching a small bouquet of flowers, Ashton was not.

"Good evening ladies," said Liam with a jovial smile and a bow. He reached for Gala's hand and kissed it. "You look really pretty," he said, handing her the flowers.

"Thank you," she answered, her blush creeping over her cheeks and all the way down her throat.

"And *you,* Aylan," said Liam, turning to his sister, "you look ok, too. I guess."

Aylan laughed and punched his shoulder. "I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me!"

"Yeah well, don't let it go to you head."

Aylan rolled her eyes, and turned as Ashton took her hand. He looked at the ring on her finger appraisingly before he kissed it. "You look better than ok," he said softly. His hand circled her wrist and he applied the slightest pressure. The bruise he'd left there weeks ago had faded, but Aylan got the message.

"You have no idea how much I've been looking forward to tonight," she said, refusing to be cowed by his threat.

"Well…good," said Ashton, clearly flustered by her enthusiasm. "Me too."

"Shall we go then?"

Ashton offered her his arm, and narrowed his eyes. "Yes, I suppose we should."

Aylan took his arm, and behind them Gala took Liam's, and off the two couples went to the ball.

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Garrick pulled out his pocket watch and stared at the golden dials. It was the third time he'd done so in less than ten minutes.

"Can't we go any faster?" he shouted up at the driver of his coach.

He knew, of course, they could not. He'd made the same request nearly as frequently as he'd checked the time, and the horses — not to mention the axles of the coach — were surely near their breaking point. At the rate they were going, it was doubtful he'd make it to the ball by midnight, and if he didn't make it by then, he had no reason to go at all. There was no way Aylan would leave her fiancé for a cat.

"Even if her fiancé is an overgrown sack of horse dung," Garrick grumbled.

He slumped back against his seat and pounded the upholstered cushion next to him with his fist. Unfortunately, the luxurious carriage was too deeply padded for that action to produce any kind of satisfactory release for his frustration, and so Garrick soon stopped.

"It's this *carriage,*" he said, sitting up suddenly. "I need to get out of this carriage. Driver! Driver, stop at the next village we come to."

"Sir, we are approaching one now."

"The first place you see with a stable, that's where I want to go."

"Yes, sir."

Garrick resisted the wave of panic that enveloped him as the coach slowed. "I'll make up the time as soon as I'm on a horse," he promised himself. "I'm going to make it."

The moment the coach stopped, Garrick leapt for the door. He pulled it open and had his feet on the paving stones outside before the footman had a chance to even climb down from his post. Garrick ignored the poor man's solicitous blustering and looked around to get his bearings. They were at a two-story inn in a small village just outside the capital. Shining in the distance, Garrick could see a speck of light he knew to be the Charming palace, and in his mind he pictured the tall poplar tree outside Aylan's window that he'd climbed so many weeks ago. "If only that were all I had to do to get to you now," he muttered, thinking of how far they still had to go.

At the far end of the inn Garrick saw a low structure with a thatched roof. The soft nickering from within confirmed that it was the inn's stables, and Garrick immediately ran in that direction. The ground was dark beyond the glow of the street lanterns, and uneven from the hooves of countless horses. Wishing to avoid another disaster like the one he'd had in the forest, Garrick kept his eyes trained on the earth — but his caution was fruitless. As he rounded the corner of the stable at full speed, he found himself careening and then colliding into a rather elegant looking woman who was standing there in the shadows. He fell with a hard thump to his backside.

"My goodness, are you always so unsteady on your feet?" she asked. Garrick looked up and found himself staring into the pale face and dark eyes of a woman he was sure he'd never seen before.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't expect anyone to be standing there," he said.

"Don't apologize to me when *you* seem to have gotten the worst of it," she answered cheerfully. "I was lucky enough to have Palisade here to catch me. No harm done."

"Palisade, did you say?" asked Garrick, his eyes traveling past the woman to the horse that stood at her shoulder. He recognized it immediately. "But that's Aylan's horse!"

"Oh!" said the lady, "do you know my goddaughter?"

"You could say that," he answered.

"Well you must be on your way to the ball then! I'm on my way back from The Royal School myself, but unfortunately there's been some trouble with my carriage —

"Take mine!" Garrick cried, jumping to his feet.

"I'm sorry?"

"Take mine. It's all ready to go. Just give me Aylan's horse to ride."

"Well you'll certainly get there much faster on horseback," said the woman. "You're at least three hours away by carriage, but you could probably ride there in two. And you do look like you're in a bit of a hurry."

"I am. Won't you please take my carriage?"

"Of course I will, Garrick. How nice of you to offer. And I'm sure it will be no trouble for you to borrow Aylan's horse."

"Thank you!" he said as he took the reins she held out to him. He wished to climb up that instant, but nearly two decades of

polite upbringing prevailed. "Please, let me help you to the carriage and make sure it suits you."

"Oh no, no, it's fine. You're clearly in a rush. Lucky for you, Palisade is a born runner."

"Believe me, I know," answered Garrick mulishly.

"Do you now?" asked the woman with a smirk. "She beat you in a race?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"Well that's as good as saying, isn't it? But I won't tell. Now for goodness sake, get going, young man! You've a long ride ahead of you."

Garrick didn't need any further encouragement. He legged up onto Palisade's back, and with a quick nod to the woman, kicked in his heels. The horse flew forward just as his pocket watch chimed half-past-nine.

The relief of forward motion kept any other thought from Garrick's head for nearly an hour. When it did finally occur to him that the strange woman had called him by his name — a name he did not recall giving her — he was much too far ahead to turn back and ask how she knew him. Or why she was standing alone behind a stable in the dark of night. Or why she seemed amused that he should know how fast Palisade could run. Of course, none of it really mattered. He was in a race to get to Aylan, and the woman who claimed to be her godmother had given him the means to do so. Garrick was quite happy to leave it at that.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

The Winter Ball was a centuries-old tradition at the school. The princesses in residence attended, of course, but they were far outnumbered by the other guests. Older princesses who'd already finished their schooling without having had the good fortune of marrying first returned, along with the daughters of the brothers and sisters of kings — princesses by rank, though with lesser prospects than their more fortunate cousins. And then there were the young men: princes of every caliber, and behind them a string of dukes and earls. There were first, and second, and third sons of kings. Nephews of kings. Only sons of kings. Even a few young men who'd been thrust into the role of king unexpectedly in their youth. Some were enemies, some were allies, but no conflict would stop any of them from attending this one prestigious event. At its surface it was a gathering of fortunate young peers, meant for dancing and merry-making, but at its heart it was a gathering of

future leaders meant to form the bonds, friendships, marriages, and alliances that would one day set the course for the entire world. In short, it was a big deal.

Aylan stepped into the ballroom on Ashton's arm, and took in the scene. It really was magnificent. The whole space had been draped in shimmering shades of pale gold and ivory, and every surface overflowed with hothouse flowers and thousands upon thousands of candles. Their light was multiplied in the countless facets of mirrors and crystal chandeliers, giving the air itself the look of having been shot through with golden vapor.

The guests streaming into the ballroom were equally magnificent, and no less gilded. Nearly all had chosen to dress in the palette of the winter season: rich red velvets frosted in icy-white diamonds, and swathed in miles and miles of every tone of gold. Aylan recognized a few of the faces she beheld, but Ashton's many nods and waves suggested that he knew several. "Good," thought Aylan with a grin. "The more people he's forced to introduce me to, the better."

"Why are you smiling like that?" asked Ashton suspiciously.

"Do I need a reason for smiling?"

"Yes."

Aylan looked him in the eye and answered, "fine then. I suppose you of all people would know I'm not smiling because I'm happy. It was merely an amusing thought. Pay no attention."

"Do share it. I like to be amused as well."

"I was only thinking about what a shock it will be when you find out to whom you're really engaged."

Ashton's hand found its way around Aylan's wrist with incredible speed. He jammed his thumb under the bone at the

inside of her wrist while his pinkie latched around hers and yanked it back sharply. "What, precisely, do you mean by that?" he hissed.

Aylan grimaced as pain shot through her palm, but her eyes remained steady on his. "Oh Ashton, you don't really believe that cowering, frightened girl you held hostage was the *real* me, do you? You see, when I'm not being held at knifepoint, or watching my friend's life being threatened — well, I'm not nearly so submissive."

Ashton pulled her finger back further, causing Aylan to gasp. "Are you trying to say you're leaving me?"

"You know I can't."

"That's right. You can't. Because your little friend the *fairy* promised to uphold our engagement. Her life will be consumed with it if you try to run. You'll have done worse than killing her."

"I'm not planning to leave you," Aylan said through gritted teeth. Ashton relaxed his hold on her. "I'm planning for you to leave me."

Ashton spluttered a moment and then grinned. "That *is* an amusing thought."

"I'm glad you think so."

"I will never leave you. You know why? Because —

"Because you just love her so much? Or because it's almost impossible to take your eyes off all that beauty?"

Ashton turned to see who'd interrupted him, and when he did, he broke into a wide grin. He let go of Aylan's wrist completely as he shook the hand of the newcomer, clapping his shoulder for good measure.

"Huh, look at that," thought Aylan. "The psychopath has a friend."

"She is beautiful, isn't she?" answered Ashton, his manner effortlessly transitioning from threatening to charming.

"Total psychopath," thought Aylan.

"That she is. So you can imagine my shock to see her with *you*," said the stranger with a grin.

"Oh, don't worry," said Aylan. "I'm not actually here of my own free will."

"And she has a sense of humor! How did you ever get such girl to agree to marry you?"

"I can answer that," said Aylan. "It was easy. First he grabbed me, then he tied me to a chair, and then he threatened me with a knife until I said yes."

"Well… women are always saying that they want creativity in a proposal, right?" The stranger's tone was playful, but his eyes looked uncertain.

"That they are!" declared Ashton with a strained laugh. "But quit joking around darling; Branson isn't used to your sense of humor yet."

"But I could get used to it," Branson said with a flirtatious wink, as he took Aylan's hand to kiss it. "Branson Alexander, at your service, Miss —?"

"Charming. Aylan Charming."

"Charming you are, indeed."

"Soon to be Aylan Kennsington," added Ashton firmly. "Darling, Branson is the first son of King Alexander of Praevada. It's a country about two hundred miles north of where you'll be living with me once we're married. Branson's mother and mine are sisters."

"Which means you and I are practically family!" said Branson. "I know. I know what you're thinking: what a waste it will be for you to have a cousin as good looking as I am. But it's a burden you'll have to bear as Ashton's wife. Of course, you and I

won't actually be related, so feel free to ogle me at family holidays. That's the burden *I* have to bear for being so good looking."

Aylan couldn't help the giggle that slipped out. "That must be very difficult for you."

"Really, Branson?" asked Ashton. "You're flirting with my fiancé right in front of me?"

"Hey, you're not married yet. I just want Aylan to be aware that there are other options out there. I mean Praevada is nearly twice the size of your dinky little country."

"Oh Ashton's not worried about that," said Aylan.

"No?" asked Branson. "Ladies say that size doesn't matter, but we all know. It matters. And mine is bigger."

Ashton kicked his cousin firmly in the shin, and Aylan, despite her best efforts, giggled again.

"No, what I meant was, Ashton doesn't mind that your country is bigger because Ashton is planning to use my dad's army to take over the Southern Country by force. I'm sure you've probably heard him grumbling about it, right? How it's supposed to be his? Well, that's the whole reason he wants to marry me."

"Aylan!" snapped Ashton, "That's enough. I told you, Branson doesn't know you well enough yet to know you're only joking."

"But I'm not joking."

"Yes," said Ashton, turning to his cousin, "she is. If you'll excuse us, Aylan and I are going to go get some punch. I think the excitement of the occasion has made her forget herself."

"Of course," answered Branson. "I was just going to go find some lucky princess and make her night by letting her dance with me. I'll see you two later. Aylan, it was a pleasure to meet you."

"It was a pleasure to meet you as well," said Aylan sincerely.

As soon as the prince had turned away from them, Ashton's hand was back at Aylan's wrist. "Just what do you think you're —

"Hold on just a moment," said Aylan, interrupting him. "Before you go on, there's one thing we need to get straight."

"And what is that?" Ashton hissed.

Aylan looked meaningfully down at her swollen wrist and then back at Ashton's face. "If you attempt to hurt me again — if you even *threaten* to hurt me — I will scream so loud that every set of eyes in this room will be upon us in an instant. And once I'm sure they are, I shall say exactly what it is I'm screaming about. That's your warning, and you only get one. You have less than a second to unhand me, or I swear I'll make good on it."

Ashton's face was quickly becoming a rather festive shade of puce, which Aylan thought contrasted nicely with the green vein throbbing prominently across his forehead. He dropped her hand. "Pardon me, my *dear*," he spit at her. "With your permission, may I take your hand? We need to have a talk. Somewhere a bit more private."

"Hand-holding won't be necessary. And I'm certainly not going anywhere alone with you in your current state. But if you like, we can step into the corner nearest the musicians; I don't think anyone will hear us there."

Ashton looked across the room and narrowed his eyes. From where they stood, they could hardly be any further from the musicians. "What?" asked Aylan with a smirk. "Worried about how many of your other friends we might run into on such a long walk?"

Ashton glared at her, and then yanked her by the elbow to the nearest corner, before Aylan had time to react. "What do you think you're doing?" he growled.

"I told you," answered Aylan evenly, "I'm introducing you to the real me. I like her quite a lot, but I don't think you will. Might as well get used to it if you plan on spending the rest of your life with me."

"I do plan on spending the rest of my life with you. Or, rather, the rest of yours — however long *that* may be."

"Is that a threat?"

"I leave it to you to determine. You think you're being cute? Well have your fun. Nothing will keep me from marrying you. And once you're my wife, you will obey me. In all things. Honor and obey. I will not stand for this."

"Honor and obey? Ashton, I'm no fairy. Those vows will mean less than nothing to me."

"Speaking of fairies," spit Ashton, "have you followed your logic through to its end? When you've convinced everyone that I'm a monster, and they ask why you don't break the engagement, are you going to betray your friend? Tell them how stuck you really are because of her dirty fairy blood?"

"You know I won't, I never would. But I won't need to. You'll break long before then."

"You don't know me very well."

"But well enough. It looks like more friends are coming your way."

Ashton spun around to find a pair of princesses, and between them, a rather gangly looking young man. Their remarkably similar features announced the trio siblings; Ashton's expression announced he knew them well. He smiled broadly and

gave a friendly wave at their approach, and turned quickly back to Aylan. "*Don't,*" he whispered.

"More friends come to hear our love story," Aylan murmured.

Ashton took her hand, but lightly. "*Don't,*" he said again. And then, to Aylan's surprise, added, "Please."

"Ashton!" called the young man with an embarrassed flush. "Forgive us for interrupting you; my sisters insisted on dragging me over here. I told them you seemed, er, busy."

"Don't be silly," trilled the shorter girl, giving her brother a playful smack on the arm. "We're all old friends, I'm sure Ashton is happy for the interruption. Aren't you, Ashton?"

"It's always a pleasure, Lise," answered Ashton with a bow. The sisters giggled and bustled forward, clearly no longer in need of their chaperone. Each took one of Ashton's arms, brushing Aylan aside, and forgetting their brother completely.

"It's been an age since I saw you," purred the taller of the two, "why haven't you written me?" Ashton cleared his throat, and Aylan was quite sure she saw the hint of a flush upon his cheeks. Whether it was for the rudeness of his friends or something else, she couldn't tell.

"Joleigh, before we discuss my many faults, there is someone I'd like you to meet."

The girl stamped her foot. "Jo*leigh*?" she asked. "Why do you call me that? You called Lisette by her pet name, can you not call me by mine as well?"

"Er —

"He calls me Joy," said Joleigh, acknowledging Aylan for the first time. "Because he can't help but be happy when I'm near."

"How nice," said Aylan dryly. "He calls me Aylan, because that's my name no matter what mood he's in.

"Joleigh," cut in Ashton firmly, "I'd like you to meet Princess Aylan Charming. She and I are engaged."

"That means we're getting married," said Aylan, when the other girl didn't respond. "Although if you have dibs on him, I'm happy to step aside."

Joleigh's mouth opened and shut and opened again in rapid succession. The shock on her face was as apparent as the strain on Ashton's.

"Joleigh, the last time we spoke I told you —

"Don't," she gasped. "Don't." Her bravado was gone; she looked quite faint.

"Joy… ok. I'm going to take Aylan to dance now. I'll, uh, write you."

Ashton took Aylan's hand and led her away from the group. She was as surprised as anyone at what she'd just witnessed, so it took several seconds before she turned over her shoulder and called, "you really can have him if you want!" She wasn't sure that the other princess heard her over the festive buzzing of the room.

"Leave her alone," snapped Ashton. They were in the center of the floor, and he drew her to him as they joined in the waltz.

"If you're already engaged, then our engagement is void."

"Joy and I are not engaged."

"Are you sure, because —

"I said that we're not!"

Aylan considered this for a moment and then decided she believed him. If Ashton had been in a secret prior engagement, Gala would have picked up on it. "But you could be," she

murmured. "If you gave up our engagement, you could have your Joy."

"Shut up," said Ashton.

"Don't you think I'll use her against you? Don't you think I'll bring her up every chance I can? Don't you think I'll tell everyone who congratulates us on our marriage that I know for certain you don't love me?"

"No one would be surprised by that," said Ashton. "Marrying for love? No one does that."

"My parents did."

"Your father was an idiot. He got nothing from that marriage."

Before she realized what she was doing, Aylan slapped his face. Hard. "No, *you're* the idiot. How do you think we got here? Because another idiot in the past made the same stupid choice you're making. Land, wealth, power? Who has *ever* been happy with those without love? You think you'll be happy if this plan works? Truly?"

"There is *nothing* you can say," said Ashton through gritted teeth. "There is *nothing* you can do to stop this."

He gripped her waist and determinedly led her deeper into the swirl of dancers — but it didn't escape Aylan's notice that he altered his steps so as not to have to face the girl still standing in the corner from which they'd come. "We'll see about that," Aylan murmured.

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"Gala?"

"Hmm?"

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Hmm?"

"You seem a little distracted."

Gala and Liam were spinning gracefully around the dance floor, weaving in and out around dozens of other couples. When they'd first stepped onto the floor, it was all Gala could do not to blush every time she looked up and found Liam looking back down at her admiringly. The feeling of his fingertips grasping her waist, of his broad shoulder under her own hand, of the butterflies swirling in her stomach — all of them combined to produce a sensation of buoyancy quite different than the one Gala was used to. She'd grinned like an idiot, and was gratified to see Liam doing the same.

All that had changed when Ashton and Aylan stepped out on the floor. At first, Gala had been thrilled to see them dancing together like a real couple, for part of her still held onto the hope that they could find a way to be happy. That hope died the minute she saw Aylan slap Ashton's face. Alarm bells went off in her head, and Liam was forgotten, as all her fairy senses honed in on Aylan and Ashton. In fact, she was so focused on the two, she didn't even pick up on the fact that Liam was secretly trying to stomp on her feet to regain her attention. Of course, his efforts were fruitless; though he kicked and thrashed in a way that was ludicrously un-waltz-like, he just couldn't seem to locate Gala's feet. After several minutes he gave up, and pulled her to the edge of the floor. "Why don't I go and get us some punch?" he asked curtly.

"Oh, uh, sure. Tell him I say hi," answered Gala.

Liam groaned, and dropped her hand. "Of course, I'd be happy to tell the *punch* you say hello."

"You're sweet." She didn't turn to look at him as he walked away, and so she didn't see Olivia scrambling gleefully through the crowd to intercept him. Not that it would have mattered; Liam had ceased to exist in her consciousness. The only two people in the world were Aylan and Ashton.

"It's time to end this," she murmured under her breath. "Once and for all. She promised to marry Ashton, and she will. And if it means getting Garrick out of the way, so be it." Gala set out in the direction of Aylan and Ashton, her intention clear. "I'll tell Ashton that Garrick is on his way. He'll be able to intercept him and deal with him. Aylan will never need to know."

Her purpose was so singular, she didn't even attempt to mimic the motion of walking as she glided across the floor, nor did she cast down her radiantly glowing golden eyes. Her promise had transformed her into a being that no longer seemed human; the fairy had taken over completely.

All around her, heads turned and eyes followed, but Gala didn't care. Nothing mattered, nothing existed, outside the promise she was magically bound to keep. It was not until she was within steps, if her progress could be measured in such a way, of Ashton, that an unexpected hand around her wrist pulled her to a halt.

"Hello beautiful," drawled a pleasant voice. "It's your lucky day! I can't stand to see a pretty girl wandering alone around a dance floor, so I'm going to give you the pleasure of dancing with me instead."

Gala looked down at her hand and then up at his face, confused. "I'm sorry, who are you?"

"Whoa, did you just shrink, or did I get taller? I'm Branson Alexander, of Praevada. And you are?"

"Gala, of…Oh my God!"

"Of Ohmygod? Never heard of it. Cool name though. Maybe if this dance works out and we get married we could combine names. Praevadmygod? I like it."

"No, not — never mind. I need to go."

"Are you refusing to dance with me because of my lame joke? Because I have to be honest, that's never happened to me before. Being refused, I mean. I tell lame jokes all the time. Surprisingly, I find your rejection even more intriguing than your freaky eyes though. So how about I ask again, but nicely this time?" He finished his statement off with a rather charming wink, but it was lost on Gala.

"L-Later," she stuttered. "I have to go. Find me later."

Gala turned and raced off the dance floor, in the opposite direction from which she'd come. Two images crowded out everything else in her mind, and neither of them were the faces of Aylan or Ashton. The first was that of Branson's hand around her wrist. He'd meant nothing threatening by the gesture, but it called to mind the pain she'd seen inflicted upon her friend in a very similar fashion. The second was of the hem of her dress dragging on the ground. The first image was disturbing, the second shocking — because it proved that Branson was right. She had shrunk. Or rather, *sunk*. By nearly two inches. Something about the memory of Aylan's pain had broken through the fairy veneer; the human in Gala was fighting back.

"I need to get out of here," thought Gala, in a panic. "While I still can." She whirled toward the grand entrance of the ballroom and set off at a near sprint through the air. All of her consciousness that wasn't taken up with her need to escape, she devoted to the memory of feeling her friend's pain. It was her talisman against the damage she'd been about to cause. As long as

she could hold on to that memory, make her own wrist burn with it, her promise didn't stand a chance.

And neither did Gala.

For a small fraction of a second, the fairy in her was obliterated, and along with it, Gala's peculiar talent for staying aloft. For the first time in her life, the tips of Gala's toes grazed the solid ground beneath them. Having never been able to learn to manage the weight of her own body against the earth, she immediately felt another new sensation: that of falling, uncontrollably, toward the dangerously solid-looking marble floor. Gala cringed with terror, and it was enough to break her concentration. Her fairy blood rushed through her on a wave of adrenaline, and caught her on a familiar cushion of air.

Gala breathed a sigh of relief, and then jumped up as quickly as she could before anyone had time to notice that only the skirt of her gown had actually made contact with the floor.

"Gala! Gala, oh my gosh, are you ok?" called a familiar voice. In another breath Marisol was at her side, with Lily close behind.

"We saw you running for the exit and were coming to see what was the matter," gasped Lily.

"We certainly didn't expect to see you fall like that," said Marisol.

"Seriously, you're the most graceful person anyone has ever met. The face you made while falling was hysterical though. No offense, but you *really* need to work on your falling face. It's hideous."

"Lily! Can't you ever be serious?"

"I *am* being serious. It was terrible. If one *must* fall, one ought not look as though they are soiling themselves while doing so. At least, that's what my governess used to say."

"Your governess used to say that? Seriously?"

"Among many other things."

"Pearls," said Marisol, rolling her eyes. "Your governess was obviously full of them. Gala, are you ok? We saw you running out, was it because of Liam? Say the word and I'll go over there and give him a piece of my mind."

"Liam?" asked Gala, confused.

"And Olivia," Lily clarified.

Gala looked to where they pointed, and after a moment of searching, she made out the shape of Liam's broad shoulders partially concealed behind a giant potted plant. His head was bent low over his companion, a girl whose arms were wrapped tightly around his waist.

"Olivia?" Gala asked.

"I know," said Marisol with a sigh. "Making out with him behind the shrubbery. *Tsk tsk.*"

"The good news is that it's highly unlikely he saw your hideous fall face," said Lily. "Want us to go over there and break up their party? We will if you want. But if *I* were you I wouldn't give him the time of day. Leading you on like that! Why, he was staring at you earlier the way Aylan was staring at Garrick that day back in the carriages."

"I definitely thought he liked you," said Marisol. "What a jerk."

"Maybe it's a family thing. One look, and you'd *swear* they were in love with you. I wonder if I can do that face?" Lily pulled

in her cheeks, parted her lips, and stared intensely at Marisol. "What do you think? Are you feeling woozy and love-struck yet?"

"No, you idiot, I'm feeling terrified. You look like you want to murder me. Aylan does it much better."

Lily snickered. "Am I at least less scary than Gala's falling face?"

"Oh for the love of God, Lily! *No one* makes an attractive facial expression when they're falling down! If you smiled while falling, you'd look like a maniac! And besides, Gala, I saw it too, and it was not that bad. Not even close to 'soiling yourself' bad."

"You're a good friend," said Lily with a grin. "Now back to the 'I'm so in love' face; I hope Garrick didn't fall for it, since Aylan turned out to be engaged to Ashton. And where is he anyway? I thought for sure he'd be here."

Marisol ignored Lily and turned back to Gala. "It seems a bit late to warn Olivia. Oh, she's going to be so embarrassed in the morning. I hope you won't be too harsh on her."

"Marisol, don't be a ninny. Olivia is over there *making out* with Gala's date. Gala can be as mean as she wants in the morning."

"I don't mind it," said Gala. Both of her companions turned at the new tone in Gala's voice. It'd gone completely hollow.

"Oh honey," crooned Marisol, "you don't have to put on airs for us. Of course you're upset —

"What's wrong with your eyes?" shrieked Lily.

"Nothing," answered Gala. "It's nothing. If you'll excuse me, I need to go talk to Aylan."

"About her idiot brother?"

"Uh, yes," answered Gala. "I'll talk to you two later."

Gala hurried away from them before they had a chance to say anything further, reversing her course for a second time. The trek she made across the dance floor then was to be the strangest of her life. The fall had broken her concentration, and Lily's comment about Aylan and Garrick had revived her promise as well; yet the memory of pain still burned on her wrist. And so Gala was a princess torn between two versions of herself that simply could not coexist any longer.

As the two sides battled it out, Gala found herself dipping to the ground and popping back up again in rapid succession. Her eyes flashed and extinguished and then flashed again, like the rotating lantern of a lighthouse and with just as much prominence. If her first journey across the floor had caused eyes to turn, this one made dancers stop outright and stare. And still Gala didn't know which side of her would have the upper hand by the time she reached Aylan and Ashton. Would she warn Ashton about Garrick's impending arrival, or would she warn Aylan?

Ashton

Aylan

Ashton

Aylan

Ashton

Aylan

"Ashton?"

"Yes?" answered Ashton, as he pulled Aylan to a halt.

"Do you mind if I cut in? You and I need to talk."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

"That's not Gala," Aylan whispered to herself as she stalked off the dance floor toward the several open doors leading out onto the terrace. "That's not Gala. That's a shell, a zombie, she's not in control." Aylan knew the words were true, but she continued to repeat them over and over again, as a mantra against the fury she felt deep in her belly. She'd seen the golden glow in Gala's eyes, and knew what it meant; it meant that Gala had stumbled into some kind of knowledge that would support Ashton's quest to trap her in a marriage, and that Gala was even then sharing that secret. Though she knew her friend was not in control, Aylan felt intensely betrayed.

"I'm having a hard enough time putting him off this marriage without your help," Aylan grumbled. "And the only reason I can't just leave him outright is because of *you.*" Suddenly Aylan's eyes softened. "That's right," she whispered, "because of

you. Because you're my friend, and I won't abandon you to the hollow life of a zombie. Because I love you. And I know the human part of you loves me, too."

Aylan lifted her chin and squared her shoulders. The familiar waltz was nearing its end, and she knew Ashton would come for her just as soon as it was over. He'd never take a chance on leaving her alone too long, now that he knew she was on the offensive. "It's just a few minutes. And it doesn't matter what Gala has to say, I'm going to break him."

But then something odd happened.

The notes of the traditional waltz began to blur and blend, not coming to a crescendo as Aylan had expected, but slowly, seamlessly morphing into another song entirely. It was one of the traditional songs of Aylan's country, a long poignant piece written as a tribute to the history of her homeland. The *entire* history of her homeland.

"But why in the world would they play this tonight? This piece is nearly twenty minutes long!" Aylan stamped her foot, frustrated that her plan was being stymied for such an intolerable length of time. The night was drawing to a close — any minute she didn't spend needling Ashton was a wasted minute.

She turned toward the orchestra, hoping she might signal the conductor to be done with it. Oddly, the man already stood facing her, as if waiting to meet her gaze. She caught his eye and he held it for a moment, before giving her a very deliberate bow and a wink. He then turned back to his musicians without any further acknowledgement.

"What in the world is going on?" thought Aylan. "Did Gala request that piece to keep me away from Ashton?"

It was in the midst of wondering that she felt the tap on her shoulder, and warm breath against her ear. A familiar voice murmured, "May I have this dance?" and heat surged over every inch of her skin. Aylan knew then that whoever had requested the song, it hadn't been Gala.

"Garrick," she breathed, as she turned to face him. "What are you doing here?"

"Sorry I'm late. Didn't you get my letter?"

"Letter?"

"I guess not," he said with a grin. "Dance with me, and I'll tell you what it said. You look so, so beautiful by the way."

"Thank you," she said, shyly matching his smile.

Garrick took her hand and led her not into the crush of dancers on the floor, but out into the candlelit glow of the terrace. The night air was sweet and cool, and Garrick's hand in hers was warm and strong. When he took her in his arms, Aylan forgot about Ashton completely.

For several minutes, the two held each other without a word — without the slightest movement in acknowledgement of the fact that they were at a ball, and not in a world of their own making. When the tenor of the song finally shifted, Garrick did too, sliding his hands down to Aylan's waist and pulling her into a slow waltz. "If this is the last time I'll be able to hold you like this, I needed to make it count," he whispered.

"I don't want this to be the last time," answered Aylan.

Garrick pulled back to look her in the eyes. "Neither do I."

"Tell me what your letter said."

"It said that I was the biggest idiot in the world for leaving the way I did."

"Garrick. You weren't the idiot, I was. Of course you left. I'm only surprised that you came back after what happened."

"I left because I didn't know yet how much I loved you."

"And because I broke your trust. I never should have let you find out about Ashton the way you did."

"I agree that that certainly wasn't our finest hour. But I didn't leave because of Ashton, I left because you injured my pride. A stupid reason to throw away everything you ever wanted, but there it is."

"Throw it away? *I* was the one who messed it up. I should have told you. I should have been honest with you."

"That's what you were trying to do with the flowers that day, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Ok, then be honest with me now. Were you already engaged the day I met you?"

"No."

"And if I'd been the sort of man I ought to have been, right from that first day… If instead of fighting with you on your brother's ship, and then letting you walk away, I'd apologized. All I wanted to do that day was walk with you, and be near you. That's all I've wanted since I first laid eyes on you. But instead I gave in to the part of me that thought I was superior, the part I'm ashamed of, and I did that for far too long. If I hadn't… if I'd just told you that I wanted to get to know you better… would you still be engaged today?"

Aylan smiled at him sadly. "No, I wouldn't." It was the truth. Not because she wouldn't still have done everything in her power to save the life of her friend, but because she'd never have

been in a position to have had to, had she and Garrick not quarreled that day.

"So you see? That's why I came back. To see if, maybe, I might show you that I'm a man worthy of your love. As I should have done in the beginning."

"But —

"I don't care. You haven't married him yet… er, have you?"

Aylan grinned. "No."

"Good. Then I still have time to tell you." Garrick took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. "Aylan, I know I've only known you a few months, and that's hardly any time at all. But there's just something about you. You've made an impression on me somewhere so deep, I can't reach it. I don't want to reach it. I don't want to spend my life hoping what I feel for you will fade; I want to spend it *with* you. So this is me begging you… don't marry him. At least, not yet. Give me a chance to win you first. Give *me* a chance to be that man."

Aylan couldn't help the smile that lit up her face. "Garrick, from the moment I first laid eyes on you, from our stupid fight to our first kiss, from the first time you said you loved me, you have *always* been that man. The only man. And that's the honest truth."

Garrick bent to rest his forehead against hers. "I love you. Still. Always."

"And I love you."

He exhaled deeply. "I want to kiss you so badly."

"Why don't you?"

"People might see. They don't know about us yet, they think you're —

"I don't care."

"But what if *he* sees? Shouldn't you tell him first?"

"Garrick, darling, I know I have no right to ask you to trust me. Not yet."

"I trust you."

"Then listen to me. I love you. I swear to it. But there is so much you don't know. It's so much bigger… and I can't tell you any of it, and I can't tell you why. I can't walk away from Ashton yet, but I want to. I'm desperate to. And I'm going to find a way. But if it takes some time… if… if…"

"I won't let him take you from me."

"No one could ever take me from you."

"Then I'll wait. I'll trust you, and I'll wait for you."

"But you still won't kiss me?"

Garrick cocked his head playfully and grinned. "What am I? Your little piece on the side? Greedy girl!"

"I am greedy where you're concerned. I'll always want more of you, and never have enough."

"Well in that case…" Garrick swept her back in a rush and dipped her low. Aylan only had an instant to squeal with delight before his lips claimed hers, and the familiar feeling of golden warmth engulfed them both. In a vague, fuzzy part of her consciousness, Aylan heard the orchestra reaching the final strains of the song, but the idea that Ashton might soon come looking for her wasn't enticement enough to quit the embrace. Instead, it was Garrick who finally broke it, as the music was drowned out by another sound: that of a clock beginning to strike midnight.

He pulled back abruptly. "I didn't realize it was so late," he stammered.

"Is something wrong?"

"Aylan, I don't have much time. Now I need *you* to trust *me*. Do you trust me?"

"I trust you."

"Good. Because there are things you don't know, too. Things I can't share yet either. All I can tell you right now is that I love you, and that I'll be waiting for you. And I'll see you again soon."

"But —

"Trust me."

And without another word, he turned and sprinted into the deep darkness of the night beyond the terrace, leaving Aylan all alone.

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For several minutes Aylan stood at the edge of the terrace, just inside the halo of light. Try as she might, her eyes couldn't penetrate the darkness beyond to see where he'd gone, nor could her mind unravel the mystery of why he'd left in such a hurry.

"Perhaps he even ran out of one of his shoes," she murmured, her lips quirking up into a small smile. It was impossible not to think of her mother running off at the stroke of midnight in just such a way, all those years ago.

"And if he did," said a voice at her shoulder, "I assure you, you *won't* have the chance to return it." Aylan jumped and spun around to find herself staring at Ashton's massive chest. "I've been looking for you *darling*," he spit at her. "I had a long chat with your friend, and it seems like you and I need to have a talk. Not here though. For this particular conversation, we're going to need to go somewhere much more private."

Aylan opened her mouth to rebuke him, but before a she could utter a word his giant hand slammed into the side of her

head. White stars exploded in her field of vision and she stumbled backward, only to be yanked forward again by his crushing grip on her wrist. Her head swung like a doll's until it made contact with the immovable mass of his chest, and there it rested for what must have been a second, but felt like an eternity…

She knew another blow was coming.

She willed herself to scream, but the breath she needed was forced out of her by his fist barreling into her rib cage. The ringing in her ears was not enough to hide the very distinct sound of a crack. He spun her around so that her back pressed against him, and his arm locked across her body, holding her still. The pressure against her broken rib was far more than he needed to restrain her, a fact he surely knew, and the pain of it was nearly more than she could bear. The white stars began to morph into huge black splashes as she felt her consciousness begin to slip. Feebly she tried to cry out, but Ashton's free hand clamped unforgivingly over her nose and mouth. Cut off from air, Aylan's body slumped forward, her head lolling, uncontrolled. The last thing she heard before the darkness consumed her was Ashton's voice, soft against her ear, whispering almost tenderly, "I've decided we ought to elope."

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Two pairs of eyes watched in horror from the darkness as Ashton carried Aylan's limp body down a concealed trail toward the harbor. One set glowed gold, the other set green. One set stood still, while the other took off into the night…

Chapter Forty

Gala heaved again as she vomited uncontrollably into the shrubbery. Mascara blended with her tears and ran down her face, blurring her vision, but it could do nothing to soften the image that continued to replay in her mind: that of Aylan's head whipping back from Ashton's blow, and the thin stream of blood that followed, trailing red through Aylan's beautiful golden hair. Gala had wanted to scream and run for help, but she couldn't. She was helpless as the two equal and opposite forces inside her pulled in different directions, rendering her paralyzed and mute. She'd watched Ashton carry her friend's body into the night, and she'd done nothing to stop it.

In that moment, for the first time in her life, Gala felt an overwhelming hatred for the fairy blood in her veins. She wished to tear off her skin and let it pour to the ground, and if her lifeblood flowed with it, then her life be damned.

"It *isn't* my life anymore anyway," she gasped through clenched teeth. "He's stolen my life just as much as he's stolen hers." It was then that she began to cry, and she whirled toward the edge of the terrace as the first rolling shudders in her gut caused her to retch. Still she couldn't find the will to run for help, but she managed a choking scream as she sobbed. Over and over again she screamed, in stops and bursts – some loud and primal and filled with the humanity that was fighting for existence, others gasping and short as her fairy-promise squeezed violently at her lungs. She heard footsteps running toward her, she knew they were coming, and still she screamed and choked and fought for the air she needed to scream again. When a pair of hands finally found her shoulders and turned her from the darkness, she saw that nearly the entire assembly was crowding through the doors to see what had happened. Of all the hundreds, it was Liam who'd found her first.

"Gala," he cried, "Gala! Gala!"

Still she screamed, on and on, until he pulled her to him and held her tightly against his chest. He stroked her hair and shushed softly at her ear. "Gala," he murmured, "Gala, come back. Come back. What is it, what's wrong?"

Slowly she stilled, and allowed him to hold her. She felt his hands trailing up and down her back, and it brought back the vision of Aylan crumpled against Ashton. This time though, she didn't allow it to overwhelm her; instead, she focused every bit of her mind on accepting the fact that what she'd seen was *wrong.* That no part of her could tolerate such evil. And gradually, bit by bit, the power of her fairy promise began to recede. The empty space it left was quickly filled by the consciousness of Liam's warmth, of the surety that *this* was the way it was supposed to be. She was

being held gently by a man who loved Aylan as much as she did. Whether he'd ever come to love her, too, she couldn't tell, but she knew that if she couldn't find the will to help save his sister, she wouldn't have deserved even his friendship.

"Liam," she whispered softly, fearing that even the sound of her voice might reawaken the poison inside her.

"What's wrong?" he whispered back, bending his head low to hers.

She took a breath. She could feel the pull of gravity beginning to tug at her, and in the back of her mind a separate kind of impotent rage, as of something realizing that it was watching its own death. She knew she had to say it all at once, or the chance would be lost.

"Liam, Aylan's been kidnapped by Ashton she doesn't love him she never loved him he forced her into the engagement at knifepoint and now he's hurt her because he found out she really loves Garrick so he hit her and carried her down to the harbor and he's taking her away and you HAVE TO STOP HIM…"

She tried to refill her lungs, but the minute the words had crossed her lips she felt a violent tearing, as if her body were being ripped in two. Liam stepped back in surprise as she began to convulse, the death throes of the promise she'd finally defied shaking her at her core. She had no chance to wonder if what was left of her could survive the loss. Gravity and humanity bore down on her with a crushing weight, and the world in front of her began to fade out of existence. The last thing she saw before it all went black was Liam reaching for her, his face frantic with worry. Worry for her. And maybe even a flicker of love.

She was worthy of it.

When Gala's body collapsed to the ground for the first time in all her life, the sound of it had an eerie finality. Her eyes were unseeing, but there was a smile on her lips.

Chapter Forty-One

It was the steady *drip, drip, drip* of water from somewhere above her that eventually coaxed Aylan back into consciousness. Through blurry eyes, she could tell that the room she was in was entirely unknown, and yet there was something strangely familiar about it. She sat up quickly, anxious to determine what sort of prison she was being held in, and with a sharp gasp sank back down again. Pain shot through her ribs, stealing her breath.

"*Bastard!*" she gasped, clutching her side. "*That bastard*!"

She'd forgotten about the blow to her ribs. In fact, everything after the initial impact to her temple seemed fuzzy. Gently she reached up and probed her head with her fingers. It was tender, and she could tell that the side of her face had swollen. The hair behind her ear was tangled up in a clot of blood that must have dried up hours ago — she could already feel the scab forming over the cut.

"How long have I been here?" she wondered aloud. "And where in the world am I?"

Slowly she raised herself up on an elbow to get a better look at the room around her. The walls and floors and ceiling were all made up of rough wooden planks, slightly bowed to create a sort of elongated bowl. It was at the bottom of that bowl that Aylan found herself, on a crude pallet of rag-stuffed canvas. Above her, a single lantern was strung to a beam, and it was the water condensed on its glass face that was the source of the dripping. Aylan noticed that the light cast by the lantern's flame was not stable, but rather that it moved slowly from side to side, swaying, almost as if…

"I'm on a ship. A ship! Where is he taking me, where is he taking me, where is he…"

Aylan's voice broke as she became hysterical, and was replaced by a desperate keening. Hurt and alone in the dark belly of an unknown ship, she'd never felt so afraid…

until out of the corner of her eye she caught a flash of black fur, illuminated by the light of the swinging lantern. Aylan screeched and scrambled backward, her head whipping toward the movement. She sat trembling as the circle of light moved slowly back, paused, and began its forward progress again. In those agonizing seconds, all that Aylan could think was that if she were sharing her prison with rats, she'd go completely mad.

Inch by inch the light climbed the curving wooden walls, until just at its peak it finally touched once more on the crouched mass of sleek black fur…

"Cat!" cried Aylan. "What are you doing here?" She couldn't explain why the presence of the green-eyed cat should be

so immediately comforting, but it was just the same. "Oh thank you, cat. Thank you for coming with me."

The cat held Aylan in its green stare for a moment, and then jumped down from its perch and followed the halo of lamplight toward her. It crept onto her pallet and settled itself into a ball at her shoulder.

"I'm so glad you're here," whispered Aylan. "I'm so scared."

The cat nuzzled her neck and licked her cheek, and Aylan began to cry. For several minutes she cried, on and on, until her eyes were wrung dry. When she could cry no longer, she spoke, whispering to the cat her tale of woe. She told it about the man above deck who was holding her prisoner and why, and the man left far behind, whom she loved. She told the cat about Gala and the promise Gala had made, about the book of fairy tales and the complex web of stories that bound her as firmly to Garrick as Gala's promise bound her to Ashton. The cat stared at her, unblinking, listening to every word. "I told him he could trust me," whispered Aylan. "I told him no one would ever take me from him..." She shivered and pulled a fold of canvas tight over her slender body. "I'm glad you know everything, cat. Now if Ashton kills me, at least one other soul knows everything that happened."

Eventually Aylan fell into an empty, dreamless sleep, as the cat kept vigil for her against the darkness.

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Aylan could sense the watery-grey of daylight on the other side of her eyelids, but rather than open them and face reality, she allowed herself to drift. In the soft place between asleep and awake,

she felt warm and somehow comforted and safe. The warmth was concentrated under her arm, where her grudgingly awakening mind knew the cat must be, but in the shifting fog of daydream, she could pretend it was something else. Someone else. In the soft place between asleep and awake, it was Garrick she was holding so tightly against her, Garrick's hair that brushed against the tip of her nose, Garrick's hand clasped over her own. If she opened her eyes to face reality, she'd lose him again, and so instead, Aylan drifted...

Eventually the thin light of early dawn gave way to the golden gleam of morning. Unable to fight it any longer, Aylan opened her eyes.

At first, the mass of nearly black hair in front of her didn't seem so unusual. The cat had nearly black fur after all, though she didn't recall it being quite so long. It wasn't until she realized her arm was wrapped tightly around a very broad body, that things stopped making sense. The cat's fur was *not* that long, nor was the cat that *big.*

Aylan sat up in alarm, once again forgetting about her broken ribs. She was lucky this time for the sudden stab of pain, for it kept her from screaming just long enough for the figure on the pallet next to her to roll over. She found herself staring, inexplicably, into the sleepy green eyes of Garrick.

"*Garrick,*" she cried out, before clamping a hand over her mouth. "Garrick," she began again, this time in a whisper. "What are you doing here? How did you get here?"

He reached up and stroked her hair. "Oh sweetheart, I'm so sorry. I saw him hit you, and I swear to you I thought I was going to kill him. I *still* want to kill him. But there was nothing I

could do. And then when I saw him taking you away, I… well there aren't words for that."

"But I don't understand. How did you get here?"

"Aylan, the cat… that's me. I'm the cat. That was me with you last night."

"You're… the cat?"

"It's a curse I inherited from my great-grandfather. Every night, from midnight until the sun comes up. Olivia, too."

"But… but…"

"My love, we'll have time for all of this, and I promise that now I can tell you everything. Most of it you know already. But you're hurt, and Ashton is bound to come down here soon. Let me wrap up your ribs and then we'll try to come up with a plan."

"Ok." Aylan stared down at him expectantly. She was brimming with questions.

"Er, actually, before we do that, would you mind turning around?"

"Why?"

"Well my clothes don't magically reappear the way my human body does. So, uh, yeah…"

"Oh! Umm, I guess that, uh, makes sense," said Aylan, her cheeks coloring red. She turned her head, but not before Garrick caught her taking a quick glance at the sheet of canvas that covered his body.

"I saw that," he said with a grin.

"Saw what?"

"Trying to take a peek, eh?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about. Get dressed."

She heard him shuffling through the scraps of cloth that padded their bed. "*Dressed* is going to be a bit of an overstatement." More shuffling, and then, "well, I guess that will have to do."

Aylan turned back to look at him and burst into laughter. "Ow!" she cried, clutching her ribs. "Ow!"

Garrick had his arms around her in an instant. "Aylan, are you ok?"

"I'm ok. You just look so… funny… it hurts."

He smiled. "Uh-huh. Serves you right for laughing at a man in his hour of need."

"Hour of need? I didn't say that wasn't a great look for you."

Garrick looked down at his makeshift garb: a large sheet of mildewed canvas tarp wrapped around his waist, and held there by a knotted bit of rope. For a shirt he'd found a tattered square of muslin with two holes large enough to get his arms through, creating a sort of vest that he'd tied shut with more rope. "I look like I'm wearing the world's ugliest dress," he griped. "You know what would go great with this dress? Those ugly clogs of yours."

"Hey, don't knock my clogs."

"I'd never. I love those hideous old shoes that I'll never let you wear ever again. And I love you too," he added, giving her a kiss on the nose. "Now let's try to wrap your ribs. I hate that you're hurting."

Slowly, tenderly Garrick wrapped Aylan in strips of muslin, until she could move without the sharp stabs of pain. Just as he was finishing, a shadow crossed the grate above their heads.

"I think he's coming," whispered Aylan.

"I won't let him hurt you again, Aylan, I swear it. Don't be scared."

She looked him in the eyes, and answered in a voice that was steady and clear, "I'm not scared."

"That's my brave girl. If you had a weapon, I bet he'd be eating his breakfast with the fish this morning."

The grate was yanked back, but Garrick and Aylan didn't break their stare.

"I love you," said Aylan.

"I love you too," answered Garrick.

Chapter Forty-Two

"Who are you talking to down there?" yelled Ashton. "I hope I didn't hit you hard enough to addle your brain. I'd very much prefer a sentient wife."

Aylan put her hand over Garrick's clenched fist. The muscle in his jaw was working furiously. "Don't," she whispered. "You know he'll have a knife on him at the very least; this space is too small…"

"Get up here," Ashton called. "*Now.* It's time for you and I to have that discussion I mentioned last night, and I want to see you in the light of day."

"I'm going first," said Garrick.

"But —

"Non-negotiable," he interrupted, stepping onto the first rung of the ladder.

Aylan watched him climb, beginning her own ascent once his feet were out of her line of sight. She knew the moment when his head cleared the grate because she heard the heavy footfalls of Ashton stumbling back in surprise. She expected the sound of a charge to follow, but Ashton seemed to be holding his ground. Finally Aylan's head peeped up from below the deck, and she found Garrick standing defensively between her and Ashton, while Ashton stared acidly at what he could see of her between Garrick's legs.

"So this is your plan B, darling?" Ashton spit, as Aylan pulled herself onto the deck. "A stow-away prince in a dress, who can't lay a finger on me to defend you? Pathetic."

"Don't be so sure," said Garrick evenly.

"Oh please. Chivalry will only take you so far when you're fighting against yourself. I can't even hurl you off this damn ship and hope you drown."

"What is he talking about?" asked Aylan.

"Think about it," snapped Ashton harshly. "Use that freshly addled brain of yours. I told you the story on the day you agreed to marry me. We're both *cursed,* remember? Neither country can attack the other without suffering an identical loss. So if I use my sword to make your lover-boy here a head shorter, I've pretty much signed off on my own life too... Watch." Ashton picked a pebble from the underside of his boot, and chucked it at Garrick. It bounced off Garrick's forehead and plunked harmlessly at his feet. Less than a second later a gull appeared, flying fast toward the ship from starboard. As it glided over Ashton's head, it released something from its beak: a small shell, roughly the same size as the pebble. It pinged off Ashton's forehead and clattered to the deck.

Though he'd initiated the demonstration, the outcome of it seemed to throw Ashton into a rage. "*Damn it,*" he bellowed, grabbing the deck's railing and shaking it violently. "Damn it, damn it, *damn it.*" One of the wooden finials broke away with a snap, and Ashton hurled it into the sea. "This is *your* fault," he screamed, turning toward Aylan and jabbing a finger at her chest. "If you think, for even *one second,* that I will allow you to —

"That's close enough," growled Garrick, pushing Aylan back and maintaining his position against Ashton's advance. "Don't you get near her, don't *touch her.* You will never lay your hands on her, ever again."

"Guess my plan B isn't so pathetic after all, huh?" said Aylan under her breath.

Ashton paused, but only for a moment. He glared at Garrick, who stared stonily back at him. Aylan could tell that something in Ashton was about to snap. His massive body seemed to grow as it heaved and filled with heavy rage; he snarled in a way that was almost feral – wild and un-human. And then, before Garrick could raise his arms to defend himself, Ashton grabbed him by the shoulders and threw him into the rail. Garrick doubled over as the impact to his gut knocked the air out of him, and for a fraction of a second Aylan thought he would tip over the side. Instead he righted himself and lunged at Ashton — but not before Ashton lunged at Aylan.

"I'll kill you for this," he screamed. "I swear I'll do it. But I'll be damned if you won't marry me before I do!"

Aylan threw her hands up in a defensive stance as the mountain that was Ashton barreled toward her, but it was totally unnecessary: Ashton didn't get within ten feet of her. For just as he was passing the ship's boom, a rope inexplicably snapped, causing

the heavy wooden arm to swing forward wildly. It caught Ashton in the gut, knocking him backward and emptying his lungs. He stood up again, panting with fury, but he didn't try another charge.

"Learned your lesson now?" Garrick taunted. He'd positioned himself once more as Aylan's shield. "It doesn't matter if you're some gigantic freak of nature with a sword; of the two of us, only one is *willing* to die today. But if I go down, so do you. So your choices are these: break your engagement and take Aylan home *right now*, or fight me until we're both dead. Either way, she's free of you."

Aylan held her breath as Ashton stood statue-still, considering Garrick's offer. After several minutes of silence he answered "I have a better idea." He took a step forward. In nearly perfect unison Aylan and Garrick each took a step back. Ashton chuckled viciously, clearly pleased. "Shall we *dance?*" he asked with an exaggerated bow. "Aylan, you and I hardly got to dance at all last evening, and from what I saw of your dance with Garrick, *he* could certainly use some instruction."

"You're mad," Aylan answered.

"Oh no, my dear. A madman isn't a rational creature. I'm ambitious. Single-minded. Perhaps you even think me cruel. But a madman? Certainly not."

Ashton took another two steps, and Aylan and Garrick copied him in reverse.

"Mind the rail," Ashton purred. "It'd be inconvenient for me if either of you were to accidentally fall overboard." Another step. "Actually, I guess I don't mind if Garrick falls. It wouldn't have technically been by my hand."

"What are you playing at?" Garrick growled.

"Playing? Oh no, no. What's happening now is quite serious. Quite serious. I'm going to teach you to dance."

"He's mad," whispered Aylan, so that only Garrick could hear her.

Two more steps and then another two. Each time Ashton moved forward, Aylan and Garrick moved back. It seemed to Aylan that Ashton was testing something, but she had no idea what it might be. The boat teetered on the waves as the boom swung uncontrolled, and still the trio circled the deck, its polished planks now a perversion of last night's ballroom floor, in tandem.

After several minutes of silent pacing, Aylan began to notice a rhythm. She found that she could predict the pattern of the steps — one, then two, then two, then two, then one, then one — and she found that her own steps were becoming automatic. Thoughtless even. Like they really were dancing, just as Ashton had suggested.

Until Ashton moved forward three steps when he ought to have only moved one.

Garrick was caught off guard, but just barely. He stumbled back in haste, but not enough to outdistance the very tip of Ashton's sword. It slashed through the air, cutting at the fabric of Garrick's vest, and Aylan, unable to see the what damage had been done rushed forward, fearing the worst.

"No!" yelled Garrick, pushing Aylan back blindly without taking his eyes off Ashton. "That's what he wants! Stay back."

Aylan caught the grim smile on Ashton's lips and knew Garrick was right. Ashton had decided that the love she and Garrick shared was not a strength, but a weakness. A weakness to be manipulated. He knew that if he could land a blow — not a fatal blow, for he'd need to withstand it as well – but one just

bloody enough to make Aylan forget to retreat, the game would be over. Aylan stepped back, hating Ashton more than she ever had.

"I told you I'd teach you to dance," Ashton sneered. "But clearly you still need more practice." He stepped forward. Aylan and Garrick stepped back. The dance continued.

It took longer this time, but Aylan felt herself settling once more into a rhythm. She could tell that Garrick was too, for the attacks that were now frequently being leveled at him were overtly patterned. Two thrusts at the head, next time at the belly. One at the heart, then the belly again, then two more at the head. Yet none of the attacks seemed particularly threatening. They not only lacked the force of the first one, but they began to feel almost… lazy. Choreographed. Garrick looked like he was doing some kind of bizarre backward cha-cha, punctuated by head swipes and hip swivels. Aylan knew that he'd be on guard for a break in the pattern, but how fast could he avoid a lunge for his chest when his reflexes were telling him to be ready to move his head? Ashton, it turned out, was an excellent teacher.

"He can't hurt him," Aylan reminded herself, trying to soothe her shattered nerves. *But what can possibly be the point of this, then?*

Aylan quickly found out.

Ashton thrust at Garrick's head as expected, and Garrick shimmied to the left, as expected. But Ashton wasn't finished this time. He suddenly loosened his grip on the sword, allowing the blade to swing down, and then drove its point through Garrick's canvas wrapping and deep into the wooden deck. He abandoned the sword and was around Garrick in a flash, scooping up Aylan before she realized exactly what was happening.

Garrick yanked up the sword that anchored him to the deck and aimed for Ashton, but it was too late. Ashton had two burly arms around Aylan, and the muscles of his forearm rippled as they squeezed her battered ribs. She felt faint with pain, but didn't cry out.

"Let her go!" Garrick bellowed.

"Or what?" Ashton sneered. "OR WHAT?" he repeated, this time to the air above Garrick's head. "Go on then! Send some damn bloody bird to rip up my pants leg. See if I care!" That's when the laughter started. A deep, maniacal laugh, that shook his body. "Class dismissed!" he said between brays. Aylan was convinced that he'd taken full leave of his sanity.

"Here is what's going to happen," Ashton said. "You are going to drop my sword. If you try to use it against me, the first thing I'll do is snap her neck. Once you've dropped my sword, you are going to *voluntarily* throw yourself over the side of this ship. If you do not, I'll snap her neck. You said one of us was willing to die today. Now is your chance to prove it."

"Garrick, *no*," Aylan screeched. "Don't do it, Garrick, please!"

"And *you*," continued Ashton, "the first thing *you're* going to do is learn to obey." Aylan gasped and then screamed as Ashton squeezed her tightly. She heard the very distinct cracking of yet another of her ribs.

"Stop it!" cried Garrick. "Stop hurting her!"

"Do what I say and she'll be safe. Drop the sword."

Garrick obeyed. He held out his arm and dropped the sword — right over the side of the ship. Ashton's jaw tightened as the sound of the splash registered. "That was a mistake," he hissed between clenched teeth.

"Why?" asked Garrick. "You going to kill me now? Kill her? Seems like you were already doing that without your beloved sword."

"*I* am not going to kill you," answered Ashton. "You are going to throw yourself over the side of your own free will. To save the girl. Maybe you're a strong swimmer, and maybe you'll be rescued. Or perhaps Aylan and I are the last two people on earth to see you alive. All I know is that only *two* people are going to walk off this ship when we reach land. One of them is going to be me. Whether it's her dead body that goes to the sea, or your living one, I leave to your judgment."

"No! Garrick, no!" Aylan sobbed. "Don't. Please. He'll kill me anyway! Even if it's not today, he'll kill me —

"What if there was another way?" interjected Garrick. "What if we could both have what we want?"

Ashton narrowed his eyes. "Go on."

"I know the reason you want to marry Aylan. She told me everything last night. You believe her father's army would be able to attack my country with impunity. You don't actually want *her* at all, she's just a means to an end… an end that *I* can get you to a lot easier."

"What are you proposing?"

"An even trade."

Ashton scoffed. "Only a king could agree to such a bargain."

"And I will be king. Someday."

"You would hand over your country to me?"

"For Aylan. Yes."

It took what seemed like an eternity for Ashton to finally relax his hold on Aylan's chest. When he did, she sank to the deck,

gasping for air. Ashton grinned. "I'm going to need that in writing."

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Ashton reviewed the document that Garrick had so carefully written. He read it once, then again, then a third time. It was straightforward and to the point: In exchange for giving up his engagement, releasing Gala from her promise, and returning Aylan and Garrick safely to shore, Ashton would have Garrick's country. Garrick had added one additional stipulation: that the transfer would take place *only* if his grandfather, who was still king, died of natural causes. Apparently he wasn't convinced that Ashton was above an assassination attempt in order to speed Garrick's ascension to the throne. Ashton smiled wryly at that; curse or not, the thought *had* crossed his mind. Garrick was cleverer than he looked. That was ok, Ashton could be patient.

"Everything looks right, it just needs your signature. And Aylan's, as a witness." He smiled almost playfully at Aylan. "Too bad your little fairy friend isn't here, eh? She's helpful with contracts." Aylan glared at Ashton in a way that suggested she'd find pleasure in signing the contract with his blood. He laughed in her face. "Oh come now, darling," he taunted, "no need to be nasty. I think you were right, it never would have worked between us."

When all three had signed, Ashton held out his hand and Garrick shook it.

"It's done," said Garrick. "Now turn us around and take Aylan home."

But Ashton didn't drop Garrick's hand. Instead, he stared intently at Garrick's face, his eyes wide. For a moment he was shocked, until his shock morphed into confusion… and then slowly, a grin began to spread across his face. When it was as wide as his cheeks could tolerate, he began to laugh – a genuine, belly-shaking, mirthful laugh.

"What?" snapped Garrick. "What is it now? What could possibly be so funny?"

Ashton sobered. "You know, your grandfather could easily live another decade or more. And I've just decided that I really don't want to wait that long." He picked up the freshly-signed contract and very deliberately ripped it in two, and then in two again. "The deal is off. But don't worry, I'm still going to let you keep Aylan. I'm releasing her from our engagement."

And then, before either had a chance to react, Ashton grabbed Aylan and Garrick and threw both of them over the side and into the sea.

Chapter Forty-Three

The water was shockingly, unbearably cold, but Aylan didn't have time to feel it. When her head emerged above the rolling waves, all she could think of was Garrick.

"Garrick!" she screeched, coughing up a mouthful of brine.

"Garrick! Garrick!" He was nowhere to be seen.

Aylan twisted in the water, cursing her gown as it tangled around her legs. She paddled fiercely against the waves, sending shudders of protest through her aching ribs, but she didn't have time to feel that either.

"Aylan!" Garrick called as his head broke the surface of the water at last.

"I'm here!"

"Thank God," he gasped, swimming over to her with long strokes. His arms were around her in an instant. "Are you ok? Your ribs –

"I'm ok," she answered. "But I'm not sure how long I'll be able to swim. You've got to go after the ship!"

"Are you crazy? There's no way I'm going to leave you!"

"But you have to! The curse could throw Ashton overboard any minute. If you could find a way to get back on the ship you could turn it around and come back for me."

"Aylan, that's insane. Ashton had to have had something in mind, or he'd never have thrown us over. He's probably anchored himself to the mast or something. It could be hours before he goes over, and when he does I'm sure he'll have already worked out a plan to climb back aboard. I won't leave you."

"But

"Aylan, no. I won't."

Aylan sighed, but allowed her head to fall against his shoulder. Now that the surge of adrenaline was subsiding, it was becoming more and more difficult to ignore the pain that seemed to radiate through her body, or the icy cold that was already beginning to rattle her teeth. She knew Garrick was right; if he left her now, there was no way she'd be able to hang on for long.

"Do you think you can swim on your own, just for a minute?" he murmured against her hair. "All the canvas I've got tied around me weighs a ton. I'll be able to hold you better without it."

"Ok," answered Aylan through chattering teeth. She loosened her arms and let Garrick drift just out of her reach. A feeling of panic welled up inside her without his touch, but she tamped it down and focused on breathing. It was from that small distance that Aylan was finally able to get a good look at Garrick's face for the first time since they'd been forced off the ship.

"GARRICK!" she cried, "your *eyes*!" He looked up and met her gaze, and in that instant Aylan knew: Ashton was never, ever going to get tossed off his ship.

"What's the matter?" he asked, closing the distance between them and allowing the loosened canvas to float freely. His arms found their way around her again, urging her to relax against him, but she held her body back, unwilling to lose her view of his face. "What's wrong?"

"Your eyes, Garrick. They're *brown.*"

"That's impossible. Are you sure it's not just the light? Come here, let me hold you."

"No, listen to me! It isn't the light. Your eyes are *brown.* Don't you see? Don't you see what that means? Your green eyes were never a natural color, they were always a mark of —

Garrick inhaled sharply. "The curse."

"Yes! You must have broken the curse!"

"But… how?"

Aylan thought back to what she'd read. "Remember the terms?" she asked. "Neither country could ever have an advantage. The only way to reunite them was for one king to willingly give up his share… and just now you did."

"But I didn't. Not yet. And besides, the country's split had nothing to do with the curse. It was just the first Aylan's way of punishing the king for his slander of her."

"Yes, but by giving up your throne, you did the exact opposite of what the first Garrick did. When he was made to choose, he chose pride over love. And when you had to choose you…umm… chose something different."

Garrick smiled and kissed her hair. "Don't start wondering now if you're worth it. You are. Whatever the bargain, I'll always choose you."

"I'll always choose you, too," Aylan whispered against his chest.

Garrick squeezed her gently. "So that's why Ashton threw us off the ship. He saw my eyes and figured it out. He knew he'd never have to follow. He probably just figured we'd drown and that'd be the end of it."

Aylan felt a surge of indignation. "Well we're *not* going to drown. I wouldn't give that bastard the satisfaction!"

"Me neither. I can't. If the curse is really broken, he's going to attack my country. He can do it now without fear of destruction, and my family will be completely unprepared."

"That's why he ripped up the contract. Why he gave me back. Oh, Garrick, I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. That's the one bit of good news: the deal is off, and I still have you. If we make it out of this we can fight back, and I'll have no need to step down. We'll make sure he *never* gets what he wants.

Aylan thought of her father's prized army. "We'll make sure he gets what he *deserves*," she muttered darkly.

For a while the pair was silent, each lost in their own thoughts as they watched Ashton's ship disappear on the horizon. When it finally had, Aylan whispered, "What are we going to do?"

"We're going to hang on," answered Garrick. "For as long as it takes. Someone must have seen Ashton take you. And if not, they definitely will have noticed your absence by now. Maybe even

discovered that Ashton's ship is gone. They'll come after you. They have to."

"They have to," repeated Aylan.

"They will."

Aylan settled her head against Garrick's chest and let his arm support her. She tried to absorb every bit of the heat that radiated off of his skin, but she knew it wouldn't be enough. They could reassure each other over and over again, but eventually the water would consume them. Aylan shivered even under the direct sunlight of nearly noon – she didn't dare imagine what it'd be like to try to fight through the freezing night once the sun had set.

"Aylan," Garrick whispered after several minutes, "do you see that glowing?"

"Glowing?" asked Aylan, looking up at him. "No, I don't see anything."

"Down there, in the water."

Aylan turned to peer down into the sea. At first she saw nothing; the waves rolling beneath her made it difficult to keep her head down, and the sun glinting off the water dazzled her eyes when she did. Just as she was beginning to fear that the 'glowing' was merely an illusion created for Garrick's eyes by imminent hypothermia, and just as she was preparing to beg him to stay away from whatever light he was seeing, Aylan finally saw it too.

"What is it?" she murmured.

"I have no idea," answered Garrick. "You're the sailor, have you ever seen anything like it?"

"No, never." The glowing was an ethereal blue, a shade or two lighter than the sea. At first it appeared to be a single radiant object, but as her eyes adjusted, Aylan saw that it was actually

dozens of points of blue light clustered together. "I think it's getting closer."

"It looks that way to me, too. I guess we'll know soon."

The object continued to drift toward the surface, its light intensifying as it ascended. In a few more moments Aylan could clearly see her feet, and the hem of her gown swirling and tangling around them, both illuminated in the bright blue glow. By then the points of light were in a discernible pattern – a pattern Aylan had seen before.

"It's my necklace!" she gasped, just as the tangle of silver and stones broke the surface of the water.

"What in the world is your necklace doing out here?"

"It's charmed! My fairy godmother's twin sister charmed it before she died. She wanted it to be able to help us someday – me and you – but only if we chose each other. And we have."

Garrick looked at her as if she'd suddenly grown a pair of extra heads. "Aylan, what are you talking about? What good could a necklace do us right now?"

"I don't know exactly, but I promise you it's here to help. Before I knew about the charm, I shot it into the sea with an arrow. It was the reason you fell in the woods that day; the necklace was trying to keep me from telling you about my engagement. And then you were unconscious for so long and I was so scared… I didn't want it to be able to hurt you again, so I got rid of it."

"Why I fell in the woods? Aylan, I *staged* that fall! I was trying to keep us away from those magical truth-telling flowers so that you wouldn't find out about my cat curse. And, uh, a few other things. But up until those stupid birds attacked me, that fall was completely fake."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Huh. You're a good actor."

"Thank you."

"But even if the necklace didn't make you fall, I swear that it's charmed and here to help us."

"Last night you told me you have a magical book. And now a magical necklace?"

"Yes. And also a fairy godmother. And until very recently, *you* were spending a third of your life as a freaky-eyed cat. So don't look at me like I've gone off the deep end."

"Oh I think we're both in the deep end," said Garrick, looking around at the sea with a grim smirk, "so I'll take whatever help we can get. What can this necklace do?"

As if waiting for its cue, the necklace suddenly left the surface of the water where it'd been floating and began to drift upward. It hovered in the air just above their heads, the glow of the sapphires tempered by the bright afternoon light. But it was not the stones that caught their attention just then, it was the necklace itself. For as it ascended, it also began to expand, its hundreds of silver strands unfurling and flattening. It continued to unwind itself until the necklace resembled a fine mesh net in the shape of an oversized platter.

Tentatively Garrick reached up and grasped the necklace. His arm flexed and he pulled his upper body completely out of the sea – the necklace didn't budge. "It's true," he gasped. "Aylan, if it really won't move we could climb up and sit on it, out of the water. And we'll be easier to spot…"

"I told you so! I told you it came to help us!"

Garrick grinned. "Yes, but it only came because you chose me. It says so in some magical book."

"And because you chose me."

His smile widened, and still holding fast to the necklace, he leaned down and kissed Aylan deeply. "I will always choose you."

She matched his smile. "Always."

It took some doing, but Aylan and Garrick managed to pull themselves out of the sea and onto their life raft. The canvas that Garrick had cut free was waxed on one side to make it waterproof, and so they tucked it under and around them, creating a sort of cocoon. Between that wrapping and the sapphires, which not only glowed brightly but also radiated warmth, Aylan and Garrick soon found themselves quite cozy. The necklace edged higher into the air, and as the hours passed and the sun dipped lower, the brightness of the stones became like a beacon above the sea.

"By the time night falls, we'll be visible for miles," Garrick said.

"Someone is going to find us, I know it," answered Aylan.

"They will," said Garrick, pulling her closer. "Eventually. But in the meantime…"

Aylan's adrenaline spiked. "In the meantime?" she whispered.

"Well I have a few questions for you."

"Oh."

"You seem disappointed."

"Not at all," answered Aylan, trying to force from her mind, as she had been for hours, the un-ladylike thought that she and Garrick were completely alone and that he was wearing no more than the equivalent of a loin cloth. "Ask away."

Garrick smiled and tipped up her chin. "Aylan, believe me, that dress on you was driving me to distraction even *before* it got

soaking wet. I want nothing more than to kiss you… but if I do I'll forget all about looking out for a ship. I'm lost when I kiss you."

Aylan blushed. "Lost?"

"Completely."

"I was lost the first time I laid eyes on you."

"But you still said yes to Ashton."

"I had to. You know I had to."

"I know. I'm not accusing you; I'm just in awe of you. Because I don't think I could have done what you did – given up everything I wanted, even to save a friend. I'm too selfish. You've made me better in so many ways…"

"Like helping you stay human full-time?"

"Well we won't have confirmation until midnight, but yes there is that. That's not what I meant though. What I was going to say is that, when it comes to my selfishness, you've probably made me a million times worse."

"Oh yes, you're a tyrant for sure. Never mind that you just tried to give up an entire country to save my life. People throw countries away all the time, after all."

"A sacrifice isn't a sacrifice if what you gain is more valuable than what you give up. And you are. It was an easy choice."

"Garrick, people will think we're crazy," said Aylan with a grin. "You know that, right?"

"Why, because I'm madly, passionately in love with you, and I've only known you a few months?" he asked, laughing. "That's not crazy."

"Forget about a few months, we've only been in each other's presence a total of something like half a dozen times!"

Garrick ducked his head. "That's not entirely true."

"Excuse me?"

"Well, turning into a cat every night did have a few advantages."

"A few advantages? Wait, *you* were the cat in my room that night!"

"Er, yes…about that…"

"Was that the only time?"

"Not exactly."

"Not *exactly*?"

"There were a few…dozen…other times. Never for the full night. That was an accident."

"But you weren't there the whole night. You were gone when I woke up that morning."

"Er, I was actually under your bed. Umm, naked."

Aylan gaped up at him for a moment, shocked, and then burst into laughter. Long, happy, healing peals of laughter, that shook her and made her clutch at her injured sides. "Aylan, you'll hurt yourself!" cried Garrick with disapproval, but soon he couldn't help but join her. It was all so ridiculous, so fantastic, and they'd been through so much.

"People *will* think we're crazy, won't they," he said grinning once he'd caught his breath. "This whole story, it's like… it's like –

"A fairytale," answered Aylan.

Garrick smiled. "So it's bound to have a happy ending, right?"

"I hope so."

And just then, as if by magic, the first lights of a ship became visible on the horizon.

Epilogue

Aylan smiled as she heard the ladder creak under his weight. *I knew you'd come.*

"Are you awake?" he whispered.

"Of course I am. I've been waiting for you," she whispered back. She held up the cover as he slid onto the pallet next to her, his fingers trailing gently over her bandaged sides.

"I didn't think Gunner would ever fall asleep," Garrick said. "He rolled his mat out right at the top of the ladder. I'm surprised he didn't decide to just sleep on the floor in front of your bed to keep me away."

Aylan giggled. "I think he might be a little jealous."

"A little?" Garrick scoffed.

Aylan reached for his face and pulled it to hers. "We could make him a *lot* jealous," she breathed against his lips.

"The man who's proposed to you so many times? Believe me, Aylan, I have every intention of making him a *lot* jealous," whispered Garrick, before kissing her deeply. "Every day, from now on, my sole purpose in life will be to keep Gunner at a maximum level of jealousy."

Aylan gave him a playful smack. "Be nice," she said.

Garrick settled on his back and Aylan snuggled onto his chest. "It's so much better to lay in bed with you as a human," he said softly. "To be able to hold you with my real arms."

"I don't know," said Aylan, trailing her fingers over his abdomen, "you seemed to really enjoy that belly rub I gave you when you were a cat."

Garrick laughed. "You have no idea how much I wanted to kiss you in that moment. You can't even imagine the frustration of knowing that licking your face was my closest option. And believe me, I seriously thought about doing it."

"It seems you have several more options now," said Aylan, tilting her face toward his.

"That had crossed my mind…"

Aylan closed her eyes, waiting for the warmth of his breath to become the pressure of his lips… but instead, she felt the surprising sensation of his tongue swipe across her cheek. "Garrick!" she cried in surprise.

"Shh! You'll wake up Gunner!"

"You seriously just licked my face!"

Garrick laughed. "Sorry. It was a joke, I *promise*. But once again, I'm a man with few options. We'll be back tomorrow, and I'll have to face your father. Me, the man who was pulled out of the

sea, basically naked, with his only daughter. *That's* going to be bad enough. But if I start kissing you, it'll be worse… because I know I won't want to stop kissing you."

Aylan propped herself up on her elbow and smiled down at where she knew his face would be in the darkness. "I have a solution to your problem."

"Do you? I'm all ears."

"Don't start kissing me," she said. "Instead, I'll start kissing you." Before he could protest, she leaned down and found his lips, coaxing them apart with her own. The familiar golden warmth shot through her body, and by the urgency with which he wrapped her in his arms after an almost imperceptible moment of hesitation, she could tell he felt it, too. He shifted her into the blankets, and she reached up to tangle her hands in his hair, taking no chances on letting him get away. The kiss deepened, until Aylan felt as though there was nothing left of them but breath and sensation. And then…

The clock affixed to the wall of the ship's belly began to chime.

"Midnight," Garrick said, pulling away from her. "It's midnight."

Though she couldn't see him in the dark, Aylan could tell he was looking down into her eyes. She wrapped her arms around him without a word, feeling the solid form of his back beneath her hands… and waited.

Over and over again the clocked chimed. Eight times, then nine. Ten, eleven… twelve.

"You're still human," said Aylan, her voice full of wonder. "The curse. It really is broken."

"Oh, Aylan," Garrick whispered. "Thank you. You gorgeous, funny, perfect girl. Thank you, thank you."

"It wasn't me, it was you," she answered, grinning. "You were the one who broke the curse. But feel free to keep thanking me. You were doing an excellent job of it before that clock interrupted."

Garrick laughed and tweaked her nose. "Aylan… no. Not tonight. You've given me all my nights back, forever. Let me spend this first one just holding you with my real human arms."

Aylan sighed, and snuggled back against the warmth of his chest. "You owe me," she grumbled.

"You have no idea," he murmured, kissing the top of her head. "You're a miracle. My miracle."

"I love you," said Aylan.

"I love you too."

After that they were quiet, as the rocking of the ship lulled them both to sleep.

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Olivia stared at the clock in her room, feeling more hope than she ever had. She'd left the ball early the night before, satisfied that her plan was at last on track. The drops she'd put in Liam's punch had worked perfectly; he'd been kissing her fervently behind a potted plant within twenty minutes of his first sip. Pleased with herself, she'd taken to her room well before midnight, and fallen into an easy sleep.

But this morning something had felt... different. And the feeling had only increased as the day wore on.

"Maybe kissing him was all I needed to do after all," she thought. "That's not so unreasonable; spells are broken with kisses all the time. And if I'm being honest... it was a pretty good kiss." She tried not to wonder if he could kiss just as well without the aid of a back-alley love potion.

Just then, the chiming of the clock pulled her from her reverie. Midnight. This was it. Olivia held her breath. And then...

She felt her body beginning to collapse upon itself, her hands curling under, her face racing down toward the bed. She stared for a moment at her paws, wishing she could cry, and knowing that once she was human again, she would.

Whatever shifting she'd felt, or thought she'd felt, in the world... the curse upon her remained.

Also by Carolyn Swanson:

The King's Son

Sometimes your curse is your greatest source of power...

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They say history is written by the winners, and it turns out fairytales are no different. Everyone knows the story of Cinderella, but few know Prince Charming was already engaged to someone else the night of the ball, or how fast rumors spread that Cinderella must have slipped something into his drink. Aylan Charming certainly had no idea... and she's their daughter.

Seventeen years of sailing ships and shooting arrows have given Aylan the kind of confidence a girl needs to rule the world, so when she's sent to a boarding school to finish her royal education, she's sure she'll conquer that as well. That is, until a blank book given to her by her godmother suddenly begins filling in with disturbing tales about her family's past. In this new world where status is currency, and her parents' scandal is an open secret, Aylan finds she may be stuck with a reputation she didn't earn, and only a single friend to lean on: Gala, a girl whose family secrets are even more shocking than her own.

As stories continue to appear, the revelation of an ancestor at the heart of a decades-old curse thrusts both Aylan and Gala into the center of a dangerous feud between two families — and between two princes. Faced with an impossible choice between the man holding her friend hostage, and the man she's been destined for all along, Aylan begins to see that where stories are concerned, the only ending that matters, is the one she writes for herself.

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